

LEGACY'S END  
THE LAST SKYWALKER

GREGORY O. SCOTT



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## Dramatis Personae

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AG-37, assassin droid  
Jao Assam, fringer (human male)  
Deliah Blue, mechanic (Zeltron female)  
C-3PO, protocol droid  
Hogrum Chalk, regent (human male)  
Anj Dahl, rebel pilot (human female)  
Saarai Derrol, rebel leader (Chagrian female)  
Marasiah Fel, fugitive (human female)  
Eli Horn, enforcer (human male)  
K'Kruhk, former Jedi Master (Whiphid male)  
Ganner Krieg, rebel fighter (human male)  
Kyra, rebel fighter (human female)  
Khat Lah, mystic (Yuuzhan Vong male)  
R2-D2, astromech droid  
Azlyn Rae, searcher (human female)  
Sauk, settler (Mon Cal male)  
Cade Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)  
Ania Solo, fringer (human female)  
Marin Solo, explorer (human female)  
Gar Stazi, prisoner (Duros male)  
Jariah Syn, reluctant adept (human male)  
Talon, searcher (Twi'lek female)  
Shado Vao, anchorite (Twi'lek male)  
Gunner Yage, TIE fighter pilot (human female)



## Prelude: A Long Time Ago...

Soundless lightspeed drives flung the ship through hyperspace, the climate controls circulated air with the faintest murmur, and he was totally alone in the forward hold. Nonetheless, Anakin Skywalker could find no peace.

He felt suspended between uncertain future and incomprehensible past. Just a week ago he'd been on Tatooine with his mother, sadly resigning himself to missing out on this year's Boonta Eve Classic podrace. Now he was onboard the Queen of Naboo's personal starship, joining her on a desperate mission to liberate her homeworld from the Trade Federation. A week ago he hadn't even heard of Naboo.

He'd heard of the Jedi, but only vague tales. They said Jedi were heroes who could right any wrong, and he'd often fantasized about a Jedi coming to Mos Espa to free him and his mother, and all the other slaves. Sometimes he'd dreamed he *was* a Jedi, wielding a blazing sword and righteously casting down judgement on those who deserved it. But those were just dreams, he'd told himself.

When a Jedi had come to Mos Espa it hadn't been anything like he'd imagined. That one Jedi- long-haired, bearded Qui-Gon Jinn, whose calm demeanor shielded secrets and mysteries- had dispatched no righteous judgement. He had, instead, taken Anakin from Tatooine to the very bright center of the galaxy. On tower-studded Coruscant, Anakin- just nine years old- had watched Queen Amidala speak before thousands of senators from across the galaxy. He'd watched the sun go

down on miles-deep spires and he'd stood before the Jedi Council and been judged.

They said he was not to be a Jedi. They said he was too old to be trained, and more, they said there was too much fear in him.

Maybe there was. Anakin feared for a lot of things, most of all his mother, left behind as Watto's slave on Tatooine. But as he'd stood before the Council Anakin had sensed something else; the Jedi were afraid of him, too.

He didn't understand that, but he'd known it was true. He'd felt so unwelcome in the grand, elegant halls of the Jedi Temple. Even Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon's apprentice, acted coldly toward him, though Anakin sensed less fear and more annoyance there. The only Jedi who seemed to welcome Anakin was Qui-Gon himself.

Anakin understood none of it. Part of him still wondered whether everything in the past week- everything since Qui-Gon and Padmé had wandered into Watto's shop- hadn't been an elaborate and vivid dream. It often seemed the only explanation for the strange path his life had taken.

The past was incomprehensible. The future was frightening. The Trade Federation was a powerful foe. Qui-Gon and the Jedi Council both suspected there were more nefarious forces at work. *Sith* was the word they'd used for it, though Anakin still didn't understand what that meant. He only knew the Jedi feared Sith even more than they feared him.

He'd never been feared before, and never wanted to be, except by evil slavers. He didn't understand how this could be. He'd always known he had small special talents, which had made him so good at pod racing. Now it seemed like those small things were bigger than he'd ever imagined.

It made no sense. It had to be a dream, Anakin thought, as the boy restlessly paced the forward hold, wondering how many more hours it would take before they reached Naboo.

His unhappy reverie was broken by the rear doors opening. As he turned Anakin knew there were only two faces he wanted to see: Qui-Gon's or Padmé's. This was the former. Dressed in his brown Jedi robes- similar to the shabby tunic he'd first seen the older man in but somehow more stately- Qui-Gon stood in front of Anakin and smiled gently down at the boy.

"I knew you were here," Qui-Gon said. "I felt your restless-



ness from the other end of the ship.”

He remembered Master Yoda, admonishing him for his fear, and lowered his head. “I’m sorry, Qui-Gon, sir.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.” Qui-Gon dropped to a crouch, robes pooling around bent knees. He placed one hand on Anakin’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “You’ve been through so much these past few days. I know it’s all very overwhelming for you.”

This Jedi, at least, always seemed to understand, and Anakin brightened. “Are you really going to train me as a Jedi?”

“I swear it.”

“The Council told you not to.”

“The Council has told me many things.” He smiled faintly. “They know better than anyone that I don’t always listen.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“Anakin, you are not trouble at all. Far from it. I think...” Qui-Gon trailed off. His expression became uncharacteristically veiled.

“What is it?” Anakin prodded.

“The Jedi Council is timid, Anakin. They see your potential but are afraid to embrace it.”

“You told the Council I might be the ‘Chosen One.’” He remembered shuddering as he’d heard those words. “What does that mean?”

Qui-Gon exhaled and took a minute to gather his thoughts. “Anakin, this is a dark time in the galaxy.”

He remembered the gleaming spires of Coruscant, the endless sprawl of wealth and elegance he’d never imagined on Tatooine. “It seems bright to me.”

“There is a darkness in the Force, Anakin, like the Force has been imbued with it. The Jedi have felt it for some time, and it has clouded our judgement.”

“I don’t understand.”

“None of us do. Not even Master Yoda, which is why it’s hard to decide what to do about you.”

The fact that some things were beyond even the wizened green Master’s ken gave Anakin faint warmth. He didn’t feel so overwhelmed knowing others were overwhelmed too.

“There is a darkness in the Force,” Qui-Gon repeated, “And some put faith in a very old prophecy. It holds that one day,

when the need comes, a child will be born by the Force itself. Carrying the purest essence of the Force inside them, they will heal that wound and bring balance to the Force.”

“And that’s *me*?” He felt very small again.

“Your mother explained to me how you were born. How there was no father.”

Anakin looked away. That was one thing he’d never understood; deep down he’d suspected his father was dead, and his mother just didn’t want to talk about him. Weakly, he asked, “Do you really think I’m the Chosen One?”

He waited for a long moment before Qui-Gon said softly, almost tenderly, “Yes, Anakin, I do.”

“And you think I was born by those... medi... midi...”

“Midi-chlorians. I believe so, Anakin, yes.”

He wanted to jerk away. He wanted to shout that he was just a boy. He was nine years old, was good with machines, loved podracing and his mother and watching Tatooine’s twinned sundown. He wanted to protect the people he loved; he’d never wanted to heal the Force, whatever that even meant.

Qui-Gon gripped him by both shoulders, firm but not hard. “I know this is very difficult. Anakin. That’s why I promise I will train you, no matter what the Jedi Council says. For your sake *and* the sake of the Force.”

“I... I’m sorry, Master, sir, I-”

“Anakin, you should *not* be sorry. You are a *gift*.”

He remembered his mother telling him that, those same four words. He’d never imagined how true they might be.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, “I feel... like there’s more I was meant to do. I wanted to be more than a slave... I *felt* like I was more too. Like it was my...”

“Destiny,” Qui-Gon finished. “I believe you have a destiny, Anakin, but that destiny may not be decided yet. The future is always in motion. That’s why you need a guide.”

Anakin dared look him in the eyes. From other Jedi he senses fear and resentment; from Qui-Gon there was a stunning devotion, almost as deep as his mother’s. He knew then that Qui-Gon, like his mother Shmi, would gladly trade his life for Anakin’s.

And in those eyes, like his mother’s, Anakin saw something else. Alongside devotion, irreparably paired, was love. They

said Jedi didn't love, that they couldn't or weren't allowed, but he knew what he saw in those eyes. It was only the second time he'd seen it, but he knew it for what it was.

For a second Anakin felt like he could cry, but he settled himself. He was just nine years old but destiny demanded he be more than that. Destiny would begin as soon as they reached Naboo.

"Thank you, sir," Anakin said, voice trembling. "I won't forget that."

"I know you won't." Qui-Gon smiled that soothing smile. "We're less than an hour from our destination. It's time to get ready."

"What happens when we get to Naboo?"

"Well, hopefully we'll sneak past the Federation blockade and land. After that, our friend Jar Jar will try and make contact with the other Gungans. The queen will need allies in this fight."

"Are you sure that will work?" The boy screwed his face. From what he'd heard, humans and Gungans on Naboo didn't get along well.

"I believe it will," said Qui-Gon. "The humans and Gungans need each other and always have. They are symbionts, and what's good for one is good for the other, even if they don't always realize it."

Anakin recognized that word, *symbionts*. Qui-Gon had used it before to describe midi-chlorians and the human bodies they inhabited. He still didn't understand, and said, "The humans and Gungans don't even *like* each other."

Qui-Gon smirked. "And yet they need each other. That's what symbiosis means, Anakin. Everything is connected, not only lifeforms but the vast, complex tangle of events that makes up our lives. Those connections themselves are the stuff the Force is made of. You and I are, in our way, symbionts."

Anakin frowned. "You... *need* me?"

"In my way I do." The smile went wistful. "We all need you, Anakin. I know that's hard to believe now, and frightening, but you'll discover the truth in time."

The boy nodded, doubtful. He felt no surer of anything now, but when he talked to Qui-Gon like this he felt less afraid. Maybe he could know what to do without understanding.

The Jedi rose from his crouch. “Everyone is starting to get ready in the main hold. Let’s go join them.”

Anakin nodded. Qui-Gon let a hand dangle at his side for the boy to take, and he took it. Together they walked out the door, to their waiting fate.

PART I



LIFE IN SILENCE



## Chapter One

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With a muted flash, one shuttle appeared against a backdrop of stars. Twin engines pushed the boxy, angular craft ahead on pillars of red thrust, and with minor course adjustments it vectored toward its destination. This far from the system's primary it was hard to spot; only the faintest sunlight caught the station's surface and most of that was swallowed in the rough, craggy surface of the four asteroids collectively labelled Praxal VII.

As the shuttle drew closer, more details could be seen from its cockpit viewport. The asteroids drifted in steady formation, bound together by four reinforced zero-g transit tunnels, so that each chunk of space rock became the corner of a diamond. Getting closer still, smooth metal fixtures could be seen jutting from the barren surfaces: transmission towers, shield generators, airlock portals. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the Praxal VII facility was located inside the hollowed-out asteroids, protected from cold vacuum and intruders both by a hundred meters of stone and ice.

Segmented, secure, and impenetrable, Praxal VII was usually, and rightfully, considered the most unbreakable prison in the galaxy.

The largest asteroid contained a trio of lit-up hangar mouths. Green lights winked at the edges of the central portal, signaling it was open for entry. The shuttle glided smoothly into the hangar, killed thrusters, and used repulsors to gently set down on the deck. Nearly twenty guards, all dressed in the blue armored plates of the Galactic Federation Correctional Authority, were arrayed to meet the shuttle, and as its landing

ramp slanted down, they formed two tight columns around it.

The first down the ramp was a human woman in the same blue uniform. Brown hair was pulled into a tight bun that revealing the faint scar that slanted across her left cheek, from the edge of the mouth to the outer corner of her eye. That, and the hardness in her dark eyes, robbed her face of the youth it should have had.

The captain of the prison guard, a suitably hulking Nikto, stood at the base of the ramp and held out a hand. The human snapped a salute, then placed a datacard from her breast pocket in his waiting hand. The Nikto put the card into his datapad, reviewed its contents, then handed the card back to her.

"Certification checks out," the captain said. "Your prisoners are bound for Asteroid Besh. Do you know the way?"

"I've reviewed the schematics, but this is my first time at Praxal VII, sir."

"I'll get you an escort, then. You'll be staying with the prisoners during initial processing on Asteroid Aurek and into the cell blocks on Besh. Once the onboarding process is complete, you'll get hard-copy certification to take back to Coruscant."

"I'm aware of the procedure, sir."

The Nikto looked down at her face, probably weighing its young smoothness with the hard eyes and scar. Finally he said, "I'm sure you are. If you run into any difficulties, ask for Captain Belok."

"Thank you, sir." She saluted again.

He stepped aside, looked to his lines of guards, and with wordless hand signals commanded four of them to step forward. At the same time, the young woman made signals of her own. A half-dozen prisoners started marching down the ramp and onto the flight deck, escorted by a half-dozen guards. The guards were all large and armed with heavy-duty blaster rifles; the prisoners were all in red jumpsuits, shackled with stun cuffs at hands and feet. They all looked downcast; only a few bothered to look twice at the place where they'd be spending, perhaps, the rest of their lives.

As arguably the most secure prison in the Galactic Federation, Praxal VII was reserved for the most violent criminals, the most devious killers, and increasingly, the most



threatening political prisoners. In the three years since Hogrum Chalk had taken over as regent of the Federation, steps had been taken to ensure the chaotic early days of his administration would never come again. With the compliance of both Imperial- and Alliance-aligned representatives in the Federation Senate, Chalk had enacted strict laws against potential sedition. There was no tolerance for deviants who'd assassinated Empress Marasiah Fel and attacked Galactic City, and anyone who abetted the scattered remains of the rogue Alliance fleet was punished harshly.

And the three Alliance luminaries who'd been convicted of the empress' murder- Senator Kaige, Senator Nelloran, and Admiral Gar Stazi- were being kept in isolation in the galaxy's most secure prisons.

The six prisoners being delivered today consisted of three violent killers, one high-ranking captain in a Hutt cartel, one radical caught planning a terrorist attack on Brentaal IV, and one Chandrillan banker who'd admitted to funneling funds to a rebel cell. That last one, a human woman on the far end of middle age, held her head higher than the others as she was marched between the rows of stern-faced guards, toward the door at the far end of the hangar.

The young woman who'd descended the shuttle first watched them go, then turned attention to the station guards who'd been tasked to her. They consisted of one Aqualish, one pink-skinned Togruta, and two humans: one broad and dark-haired, the other tall but thin, with red hair buzzed close to the scalp.

That man's blue eyes held the woman's for one long second before she said, "As I told your captain, this is my first time at Praxal VII. You'll have to lead the way."

"Of course, Lieutenant," said the Togruta. "Please join me at the head of the line."

"Thank you." Her eyes darted back to the red-haired man. "You too, please. Your partners can watch the rear of the line."

The other human and the Aqualish nodded agreement. The three walked hurriedly ahead, skipping past the prisoners to the front of the column. Security at Praxal VII was good; the Togruta had to wave his badge in front of the reader before the hangar's blast doors opened and allowed them further into the prison.

From there, it was a long walk down steel-gray corridors that tunneled into the asteroid. Cold recycled air whispered through overhead vents. Once they were a good three meters ahead of the rest of the group, the red-haired man tapped the rank cylinder on his breast twice and said in a low voice, "There. Short-range jamming field up. It's safe to talk."

"Good," Kyra whispered back. "Now tell me what you two have got."

"Preliminary reports were right," said Ganner Krieg. "The most secure cells are all in Asteroid Cresh."

"Which is opposite this one."

"Right," said the Togruta, Asaak Dan. "It's the second-largest of the four asteroids in terms of mass, but it's had the smallest amount excavated. The rest is still rock."

"And the cell blocks are right in the middle," added Ganner. "Thankfully, there's four pressurized tubes that lead to emergency airlocks on the asteroid surface. They're miniaturized versions of the heavy zero-g tubes that hold the four asteroids together."

"Sounds like a good escape route," Kyra muttered. "What about the main zero-g tubes? Have you figured out a way to disable them?"

"It won't be hard. They automatically seal in case of pressure loss," said Ganner. Leaning closer, dropping his voice so low she could barely hear, he added, "We've thought of a way to empty Cresh of almost all its guards."

"I'm listening."

"In case of a large-scale emergency in, say, Asteroid Besh, they'll send guards from the other rocks to reinforce."

"What kind of large-scale emergency?" Kyra looked back and forth between them and understood their grim looks. "You're talking about a riot?"

"I've got a good idea how to get one started," said Asaak Dan. "And it would get us the distraction we need."

Kyra swallowed hard and stared straight ahead. Ganner was a former Imperial Knight, Asaak a former Jedi. They were both veterans of the war against Krayt and they'd both joined the rebel effort against Hogram Chalk's government. They were both combat veterans, and the past three years of futile struggle had hardened them even more. Kyra had far less experience

and was a good decade younger than either, but they looked at her with automatic deference.

The reason was simple. Unlike them, she could still use the Force.

There were very, very few who could do that. A lucky handful had been immune to the artificial plague that had robbed everyone else of the ability to touch the Force. Cade Skywalker could do it, but he hadn't thrown his lot in with the rebels; his tolerance for lost causes only went so far. Marin, the mother of Kyra's friend Ania Solo, was off roaming the galaxy, looking for a way to get the Force back. And then there was Marasiah Fel; she should have been leading this war against her uncle but instead she'd walked away to worlds unknown.

There were a few others too. Khat Lah and his clutch of Force-imbued Yuuzhan Vong were also scouring the stars for ancient mysteries. Hatred against their race was strong galaxy-wide, and neither side of this fight was eager for their help.

So the Force, which had once touched beings galaxy-wide, spoke only to a handful. The Skywalkers, Khat Lah's company, and Kyra. And one more.

The past three years had taught her hard lessons. Her metal lightsaber, tucked against her right thigh in a sealed compartment, pressed against muscle as a constant reminder of what she might be forced to do. She'd made difficult choices for missions in the past. Those choices had cost lives, enemy and friendly. Other lives she'd taken with the lightsaber's pure-white blade.

Quiet but firm, Kyra said, "Go ahead with your plan. Do it."

Asaak nodded seriously. "I'm glad you approve."

"I don't approve. But it's what we have to do." She looked between them. "But tell me one thing first. Are you *certain* they have Stazi locked up in Asteroid Cresh?"

Ganner nodded. "If the week we've been here, I've kept track of guard movements. There's one cell that's separate from the others. It's the only one guarded by droids at all times."

"How many droids?"

"Two." He added, "Nothing you can't handle."

His compliment gave her no joy. "I'll need you two to handle the rest. Remember, we all need to be on Cresh before we knock out the transit tubes."

“Don’t worry. We’ll use one in a minute. You’ll see just how easy it is to knock out.”

Kyra hoped it would be. Two other rebels had been inserted into Praxal VII, both former Alliance commandos. Two more had come with Kyra on the shuttle, masquerading as guards. Seven beings were hardly enough to take on the galaxy’s most secure prison. Very likely this desolate floating rock would be their grave.

But they had to try. Rescuing Stazi would rejuvenate the movement and give them hope they desperately needed.

And if a heavy price had to be paid, Kyra thought, so be it.

When he heard the familiar scrape of metal against metal, Gar Stazi rolled off his shoulder, turned away from the blank wall in front of him, and sat upright. He saw exactly what he expected to see: four walls of his cell, the cot he sat on, the sink and bidet in the left corner, the door on the wall to his right, and finally, the food-tray on the clean metal floor. As soon as his eyes lit on it, the narrow portal at the bottom of the door slid shut, totally sealing him from the outside world again.

Assuming it was a world. Stazi had no idea where he was being kept, and naturally his captors hadn’t told him. His confinement was truly solitary. Even his food was usually delivered by droids. It was enough to drive a being mad; some days, Stazi thought he’d already crossed that line.

He’d always been a being who held to hope. He’d have never survived a desperate seven-year war against Darth Krayt without it, let alone won. He’d thought of that as stubbornness, not naivety, and so when Hogrum Chalk had put him up on a show trial for Marasiah Fel’s murder, along with Senators Kaige and Nelloran, plus Porat Derol in absentia, he’d clung to the belief that something would come to expose the sham for all to see.

Instead disaster after disaster had happened. A band of rogue Alliance radicals had attacked the courthouse and bombed half of Galactic City in the process. They said his disciple Jhoram Bey had orchestrated it, and that Bey’s fleet had been totally wiped out not long after.

Maybe it was true. Maybe not. Stazi didn’t trust his captors, or the tidbits of news they occasionally slipped under his door

along with two meals a day. If what they told him was true, Hogrum Chalk was unchallenged ruler of the Federation. Tem Brighton, Alliance patriot and leader of the Senate, had fallen in with him in condemning Bey and his people as radicals who had to be hunted and destroyed. Stazi himself was, in the eyes of the galaxy, a murderous traitor.

Alone in his cell, he went through fits of angry denial and equally furious acceptance. If all this was true then Chalk was far from the grief-stricken uncle Stazi had first assumed. He was a masterful player instead, one who'd manipulated his own enemies into joining his side and- most enraging of all- had actually held the Federation and galactic peace together better than Stazi.

If it was all true. Stazi had no idea how much time he'd been in prison for; his captors always redacted dates from the news-snippets they sent him. By his guess, it was between two to three years. He'd switched prisons several times, swapping planet to planet for the same basic, barren cell. They'd never stunned him unconscious for transfers but they'd always blindfolded him. He had no hint of where he was now. All he knew was the prison's hard metal walls and cold recycled air, just like the others.

Stazi refrained from giving his captors the satisfaction of a sigh. Instead he pushed off his cot, walked over to the door, and squatted to pick up the meal. It was warm, soup still steaming. He sat down on the bunk, tray in his lap, and started working on the same meal as always. It wasn't rich or filling, but he was used to it. Despite exercising the best he could with four walls and a floor, Stazi knew he'd gained weight and dropped from the fighting-fit shape he'd kept in for thirty years. Isolation was making his body soft and disjuncting his mind.

Maybe going stark mad here wouldn't be such a bad thing after all. It would at least be an interesting way to pass all his empty days.

In the two weeks Ganner Krieg had spent at Praxal VII, this was only the third time he'd seen a batch of prisoners be processed. First they were each stripped and walked through bio-scans that examined them inside and out. Then they washed and put clothes on, and then medical droids recorded their

fingerprints, retinal patterns, dental patterns, and for good measure took a skin sample for DNA registry. And then, finally, each prisoner was implanted with a small chip. Since these were all humanoids it was implanted at the back of the neck.

Ganner had gotten a look at one of those chips during the last processing. It was a simple tracking device and lacked, say, an electrical shocker or poison capsule to debilitate escaped prisoners. Nonetheless, they'd make sure to remove the thing before they took Stazi off the asteroid, just as they'd give the admiral a thorough medical check-up before taking him to a rebel base.

They'd learned their lesson on that count already. The cost had been far, far too high.

As Ganner, Asaak Dan, and the other Praxal guards processed the prisoners, Kyra and her people watched from the side of the chamber. He was immeasurably glad to have the young woman on this mission. It had been four years since he'd lost the ability to touch the Force; the first year had been the hardest, filled with regret and anger. Now he was, if not used to it, at least accepting. Sometimes. When he looked at Kyra he no longer felt envy and was instead encouraged to know the Force would somehow be with them.

He just hoped it would be enough.

After the prisoners were processed, they stepped into their new uniforms: the loose orange jumpsuits every inmate on Praxal VII wore. Ganner watched them carefully. As a supposed guard at this facility he had access to the most basic information on each prisoner, but even without it the middle-aged human woman stood out. She was smaller than the other prisoners, who were in here for violent or criminal offenses. More, she carried herself with dignity and alertness.

Her name, he knew, was Yana Oris. She was a business-woman caught funneling funds to a rebel cell. Ganner didn't know which cell- their operation was extremely compartmentalized- but if she hadn't helped Ganner personally she'd still supported the cause.

She didn't deserve to be caught up in what was going to happen next. Starting a prison riot to cover their rescue of Stazi had been Asaak Dan's ideas. The plan, which would certainly

incur casualties and easily deaths, was hardly the sort of thing he'd expected a Jedi to come up with, but Asaak had been a Jedi the same way Ganner had been an Imperial Knight. They were no longer those things and never could be again. They'd gone through stages of denial, regret, and especially anger. They'd both needed a purpose and had found it with the rebels. It was no wonder, really, that they'd become an effective team over the past few years.

Asaak had a plan to start the riot, and they'd have to enact it soon. Kyra and her contingent- which included two more rebels masquerading as guards- were only supposed to be on this station until the new prisoners were safely ensconced in Asteroid Besh. The turnaround time was scheduled for three hours, and they'd already eaten up over thirty minutes.

Ganner and Asaak had prepared for the riot, but Ganner found himself hesitating as he watched Yana Oris. He was willing to sacrifice some criminals and even Federation guards to free Stazi; he'd become that ruthless. But leaving Yana Oris, one of their own supporters, to be crushed in a rebel-made chaos was too much. He struggled for a way to help her.

After the first processing the guards and prisoners moved for the zero-g transit tunnel that connected Asteroids Aurek and Besh. The durasteel-lined tunnel stretched nearly a kilometer, and five great metal shafts ran down its length. Three were heavy-duty things devoted to moving cargo, while the other two were connected to pods with seats for passengers. After the prisoners were strapped into their spots, the guards took their own chairs. Kyra seated herself between Ganner and Asaak.

As the pod began its automated journey to Asteroid Besh, Ganner felt the light lurch in his stomach that meant they'd entered zero-g. He tapped the small sensor-jammer he'd disguised as a rank cylinder and whispered, "We can talk again."

Kyra got to the point. "How do you plan to disable the tubes leading to Asteroid Cresh?"

"They'll each shut down for a simple breach, but we've got something better in mind," said Asaak. "We've loaded barrels of dirillium nitrate onto cargo pods on both Besh and Grek. We'll call both those pods over to Cresh, then remote-detonate them using overcharged blaster packs."

“Will that bust the whole tubes?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Even if they retain vacuum-integrity they’ll still be clogged with debris from the explosion, all floating in zero-g. They’ll be impassable.”

“Good enough,” Kyra said. A few strands of long hair, weightless, drifted over her face and brushed the lightsaber-scar on her cheek. “Where are the other two people from your team?”

“On Grek,” Ganner supplied. “They’ll head over to Cresh the same time we will.”

“Once the riot starts?”

“That’s right.”

“And nobody will object to a bunch of guards running away from the riot?”

“You have persuasive skills,” Asaak told her.

The young woman’s brows furrowed and her scar gained faint color. “I can’t guarantee I can change someone’s mind.”

“There are skills and there are skills.” He lowered his voice more. “You *did* bring your lightsaber, didn’t you?”

She nodded grimly.

“Then that’s all we need,” Asaak whispered and pulled away.

The transport pod sailed straight into its berth on Asteroid Besh. Gravity and Ganner’s gut settled down. Guards unstrapped first, then moved the prisoners. Ganner settled behind Yana Oris’ back as they took the prisoners to the second stage of processing, which involved getting them billeted in their new cells. He watched the back of her neck, the gray hair pulled into a bun to expose the fresh scar left by the tracking chip’s insertion. She looked like a schoolteacher, thrown in with the galaxy’s worst. The killers and criminals in this place seemed to have particular antipathy for ideological prisoners. They wouldn’t kill her, maybe not even beat her, but they’d make her life hell.

For a second Ganner thought it would be kinder to let her die in the riot. Then he decided otherwise; he might not be a knight of any kind, but he couldn’t just abandon her.

When it came time to put prisoners in their cells, he took Oris by the arm and led her into the cell block. Ten tiers of walkways rose on either side of a stretched-long shaft, at the bottom of which was cafeteria and gathering space. No more



than one-third of the prisoners were allowed to mingle outside their cells at any time, and the doors' opening was randomized so that the exact same group of prisoners were never freed at once. When an inmate wandered out of his cell, he had no idea what other inmates he'd meet outside. By keeping things unpredictable, the prisoners weren't given the chance to coalesce into gangs or organize action against the guards.

In theory, anyway. Asaak Dan, quite clever, had found a way around that.

Ganner took Oris to her cell on the eight level from the bottom. The middle-aged woman stepped through the open portal and looked around, nonplussed, at her accommodations: bed, desk, bidet, plus a small holo-projector with very limited entertainment options.

"It reminds me of my dorm room at university. This takes me back." She turned a head and gave him a tight smile. "Maybe you understand, young man."

In truth, it reminded Ganner a little of his spartan room as a trainee Knight. "Miss, you need to stay in these quarters. Don't go outside. Ever."

Her gray brows drew together. "You told us we have some range at certain hours--"

"*Don't*," he said firmly. "If the doors open, don't go outside. Barricade the entrance any way you can, even if it's just a mattress."

She took a step back. "Young man, I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Just remember what I said." Ganner stepped for the door; he'd been here too long already. "It's for your own benefit."

She'd need a lot more help than that, Ganner thought as he stepped out of the cell and locked it behind him, temporarily sealing the woman safe with the door's frosted transparisteel pane. Not much time now; he spotted Asaak down on level six, having just put another prisoner away.

He only knew one way to protect Yana Oris for sure. Maybe he could pull it off; maybe he'd get himself killed like an idiot. Either way, Ganner decided he'd have to try. He didn't know if he could be knight and rebel both, but he was about to find out.

## Chapter Two

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The twin planets Kiffu and Kiffex were like squabbling spouses trapped in a marriage neither wanted. They swung together around the same sun, locked in elliptical orbits that sometimes brought them so close it sparked violent electrical discharges that leaped across the void and lit up the atmosphere of both worlds. The Kiffar, near-humans native to Kiffu, had learned to harness those deadly bursts and use their tamed energy to literally power a space-faring civilization, not just surviving but thriving through the storms.

In Cade Skywalker's opinion, that said a lot about a people.

Thankfully the twin planets were far apart now, and *Mynock's* approach to Kiffex was outwardly peaceful. Inside, Cade felt a special kind of anxious. With the life he'd lived, he was almost used to death-defying battles with murderous Sith and reality-bending encounters with ancient Force entities. The danger waiting on Kiffex was simpler and more complicated than any of that, not likely to kill but still liable to hurt.

Deliah Blue, seated in the co-pilot's seat next to Cade, didn't need the Force to tell what he was feeling. "Remember," she told him, "Droo invited *us* here."

"Doesn't mean she ain't planning to shoot us," said Jariah Syn as he hung over the back of Cade's chair.

"I'm ready for anything," Cade said, but he didn't feel it.

He hadn't been to Kiffex in six long years. He'd done a lot of things he wasn't proud of, especially during that time of his life, and his actions here were near the top of that list. When Droo had commed *Mynock* asking he come, she'd been purposely vague but still insistent. He frankly had no clue what

was waiting for them, but he couldn't bring himself to turn down his uncle's widow.

The last time he'd landed *Mynock* at Bantha Rawk's compound it had been in the middle of one of those electric storms, and the freighter had nearly been torn apart. Sailing was smoother this time, and as his uncle's old home came into view it seemed nothing had changed except the weather. Several buildings with multi-layered drum towers were located near the edge of a cliff overlooking Kiffex's rocky desert. Crowded close to them were several landing pads and equipment garages from which Nat Skywalker, former Jedi Knight, had run a modest starship repair center with the help of his wife and adopted children.

Nat was gone now, killed defending the Jedi's hidden temple on Taivas. That battle had been Cade's plan; he'd thought he could use the temple as bait to lure the Sith into a trap Roan Fel and Gar Stazi would spring. The Sith had outplayed them all; Cade had barely made it out and Nat hadn't.

It was one reason Droo might not be happy to see Cade, and not the only one.

*Mynock* set down on the landing pad but no one immediately came out to greet them. Still, Cade spotted a few lights on in the largest tower, which meant somebody was home. Pushing out of the pilot's chair he said, "Okay, let's get it over with."

"You want me to stay on *Mynock*, keep her warmed up?" asked Deliah.

"You? Naw. You're the only one Droo don't got a reason to be mad at." Cade glanced at Jariah, who looked away.

The three of them headed out of the cockpit, all the way down to *Mynock*'s main hold, which right now was mostly empty. The two droids stood by the still-sealed landing ramp, like they were anxious to get going.

"Don't start without us, guys," Cade said as he approached.

C-3PO shook his head slightly. "I am in no rush, Master Cade. Artoo, however, seems rather impatient."

"Are you now?" Deliah glanced at the stout blue-and-white astromech. "Miss Rawk's place, do you?"

The droid tootled, and C-3PO said, "Artoo insists this facility can perform a truly excellent oil bath. I admit to being somewhat curious myself."

“Well, we’ll see how hospitable the locals are,” Jariah grunted.

C-3PO’s photoreceptors looked Cade up-down. “Ah. I see you are not bringing weapons.”

“Is there a reason I should?” In truth, he’d thought about it.

“Artoo here has been filling me in on the details of your last visit to Kiffex. It’s clear to me this experience was less than ideal for all parties involved.”

Jariah snorted. “You’re good at understatement.”

“Thank you, Master Syn. As I was saying, there is no reason to expect a warm welcome. After all, Master Cade, when you forced Droo Rawk to perform her special healing technique on Azlyn Rae, you purposely lied to her and told her Azlyn Rae wished to be saved. This was considered a grave breach of trust on your part.”

Cade didn’t really need the replay. “I know, Threepio, I was there.”

But the droid babbled on, “In healing someone who did not want to live, Droo Rawk violated one of the prime tenants of the Kiffar healers, who have held to the customs of their order for at least seven centuries, possible nine, according to some sources, though there is disagreement among scholars whether the-.”

“Threepio,” Jariah said firmly, “We get it.”

“And *you*, Master Jariah, accompanied Cade to the nearest spaceport and proceeded to start a fight with local disreputables. When Droo’s daughter Ahnah, a newly-appointed member of the local Kiffex Guardians, attempted to arrest you for your actions, you knocked her unconscious and fled the scene.”

Jariah winced and Deliah interjected, “We *get* it, Threepio.”

“And you, Mistress Deliah...” The protocol droid stopped. “Artoo says you comported yourself admirably.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts. “Somebody had to be the grown-up.”

“Everybody likes you, Blue,” Cade said with a sigh. “Artoo, open the damn door already.”

R2-D2 whistled, inserted his access probe into the control socket, and commanded the landing ramp to lower. It dropped down with a groan, opening *Mynock*’s hold to a warm dry

breeze. Once it was fully down Cade could see that their welcoming party, such as it was, had arrived. Droo Rawk, a thickly-built and darkly-complected woman with a yellow Kiffar tribal tattoo over her left eye, stood with her hands on her hips, watching them with a guarded look and cautious Force-aura.

The other one Cade barely recognized. He was a lean and taller than Cade, with tan skin and black hair that was short but messy. When his eyes lit on the newcomers a goofy grin lit his face and he stepped forward with hand extended.

“*Chuba*, Cade,” he said, “It’s been a long, long time.”

When their hands clasped Cade finally realized this was Skeeto, one of the boys Nat had adopted after quitting the Jedi and settling down with Droo. The kid had grown too damn much since last time; it made Cade feel old.

Skeeto greeted Cade warmly, Jariah too, and pulled Deliah in for a hug that was a little too tight for Cade’s taste. C-3PO, watching behind them, commented, “I say, Artoo, this is already going better than expected.”

Cade wasn’t sure about that. He took a deep breath, turned to Droo, and stepped toward her. The woman didn’t take hands off her hips and Cade let his own fall to his side.

“Thanks for the invite,” he said, and decided to be honest. “I kinda thought you’d never want to see me again.”

“For a long time I didn’t,” the older woman replied. “I also thought you were dead for a while.”

“Well, you know me. I like to lay low and not mix other people up in my business. Figure it’s better for everybody that way.”

Droo didn’t contradict him. After an awkward silence, Deliah asked, “Are Micah and Ahnah around?”

“Micah’s off making a supply run to some clients on Kiffu,” Droo said, referring to the Cathar boy she and Nat had adopted. “As for Ahnah, she’s still with the Guardians at Ven Karya port. I commed her when I saw you lads were inbound.” She let her gaze pass to Jariah. “Whether she comes is up to her.”

“That’s fair,” said Cade. “You mind telling us what this is all about?”

“Better I show you.” Droo turned for the building, waving him to follow.

As the five newcomers trailed her, Skeeto slipped between Cade and Deliah and asked, "Where'd you get the gold droid? I've never seen him before."

"Kid, that story's so long even I don't know half of it," Cade sighed. "Though if you wanna ask Threepio himself, he'd be happy to tell you. Good luck staying awake, though."

"I can't wait to hear what you've been up to all this time," Skeeto enthused, and Cade fought a wince. Being easily forgiven was an unexpected kind of hard.

The inside of the Rawk household was mostly as Cade remembered it. The lower floor was basically an extension of the workshop, filled with tools and spare parts, while a kitchen and living quarters filled the levels above.

"Looks like you're still doing good business," Cade commented.

"We always had a loyal client base," Droo said. "Skeeto and Micah have done a great job handling things without Bantha."

"That's good to know. Really."

After they climbed the stairs to the first-floor living room, Droo gave Cade another look-over. He could tell she was judging him, trying to find out if he was the same angry, errant man who'd tricked her into breaking her vows six years ago.

"They say Skywalkers can still use the Force," she said.

"You heard that, huh?"

"Words gets around."

She didn't glance at Jariah as she said it, didn't even notice him. People might have heard how Skywalker genes made you immune to Maladi's Force-cancelling virus, but next to nobody knew that Jariah, too, had been gifted and cursed with that power on Rohakalla. Cade's friend was in no hurry to spread that news.

Cade shrugged. "What can I say? I've always been special. Usually not in the ways I asked for."

Droo snorted. *Same old Cade*, she was thinking.

But he wasn't. He insisted, "I've been handling that stuff in my own way. And I ain't just been running from my destiny again. There's Jedi out there, looking for ways to get the Force back, and we've been helping them."

"More than you can imagine," Deliah added seriously.

Droo looked at the Zeltron and weighed her words. To Cade

she said, "You'll still got your woman after all this, and your best friend. To be honest, I never thought you three would last. I guess I was wrong."

Cade spread his hands. "Turns out some people improve with age."

"I certainly hope so." Droo finally relaxed. "All right. I'll tell you what we've got. A little after your uncle passed, we were going through his things. He didn't take a lot with him when he quit the Jedi, but he brought some stuff even I hadn't seen before. I think some of it might belonged to your father or even your grandma. I figure if anyone should have these, it's you."

Cade wasn't the kind of guy who clung to the past, but he couldn't turn down a peace offering either. "Sure thing. Show me what you got."

"This way," Droo said, leading him toward a second staircase.

As he started after her, Cade glanced over his shoulder at Deliah, Jariah, and the droids, who stayed put where they were. They probably, rightly, figured this was a private matter.

Cade followed Droo to the next level. This floor was subdivided into chambers, what looked like a mix of bedrooms, closets, and a refresher. Droo took him into the largest storage room, the one with enough space for them both to stand around a knee-high, meter-long crate. With a soft groan, Droo squatted down, unhooked the latched, and pushed up the lid.

Cade had briefly allowed himself to hope for some arcane Jedi artifact that would serendipitously help them find another Tho Yor, or get the Force back some other way. What he got wasn't that. The first thing to catch his eye was a brown homespun Jedi robe, neatly folded and taking up one side of the crate. Cade bent low and picked it up. Nat had died in his robe, and he didn't think it was his father's. He partially unfolded it and could tell it was too small for either of them.

"Maybe Grandma's," Cade muttered. Jade Skywalker had died two years before her son Kol. She'd been killed by the Sith on Mustafar, and every Jedi in the Order had felt it, Cade included.

He looked through the rest of the material, spotting several primitive, bound books with printed lettering. He found a single small, disc-shaped holo-projector and tapped the side

button. The image flickered several times before resolving to show two grown men, roughly the same age Kol was now, standing on either side of a shorter woman with long, light-colored hair. He tapped it again and the woman was younger, the men smaller. He went through a few more images, creeping back in time, until he saw one where Nat and Kol were just children. Kol was held in his mother's arms, while Nat was leaning against his father's shoulder. Cade had never known his grandfather; Jodram Tainer had died when Kol himself was just a boy. Even those who married into the Skywalker line tended to meet harsh fates.

"Yeah," he said, "Definitely Grandma's."

Cade regarded the image and tried to figure if he was younger or older than his grandparents here. Having kids of his own had never been a priority for all kinds of reasons. Once he'd idly checked and found that human-Zeltron hybrid babies were possible, sometimes, but he hadn't leaped to tell Blue. He hadn't even settled his own legacy inside himself; he didn't want to pass it on to some poor kid.

"So this has been sitting here this whole time, huh?" he asked.

Droo, who'd been silent until now, said, "Yep. I knew it was here, but I'd never checked inside. Even after Bantha died... it didn't seem right to pry, for a while."

"I get that."

"I looked eventually, over a year later. I didn't do anything else, 'cause we still thought you were dead at the time. And eventually we found out you *weren't* dead... and frankly, Cade, I got mad at you all over again."

"It's okay. I don't blame you. Stang, I deserve a lot worse."

Droo gave him that evaluating look again. "It took me a long time, but eventually I decided. I'm not doing anything with this Skywalker stuff, and I'm sure Bantha would have wanted it passed down to you. Besides, Skeeto and Micah kept asking, saying you should come back."

"You got good kids. All three of them."

"I know."

Cade fished through the crate and found something else: a small metal box, barely larger than his closed fist. He picked it up, opened it, and found a good dozen small datacards placed



inside. He flipped through them and saw no labels, no markings.

"Any idea what these are?" he asked.

"Not a clue," Droo shook her head. "But we've got terminals for you to check."

"I think I will," he said thoughtfully. These cards could contain nothing valuable; they could have a surprise bounty. They'd never have found Rohakalla if Eli Horn hadn't grabbed a fistful of translated Gree documents from Darth Maladi's library before it blew. There was no telling what these might hold.

He and Droo rose out of their crouches together. As they stepped out of the supply closer a low roar reverberated through the tower's walls. It grew louder, and the building trembled slightly.

"Sounds like we've got incoming," Cade said.

Droo walked into the nearest room and glanced out the window. "Looks like Ahnah's decided to come see you."

"Can't wait," Cade said and started for the stairs, though he was pretty sure it wasn't him Ahnah had come to see. He was glad for that too; he'd faced down Droo and more or less resolved that dreaded confrontation. Now it was Jariah's turn to sweat.

When Ahnah came through the door she had on the black and gold uniform of the Kiffar Guardians. It was, Jariah remember, the same outfit he'd last seen her in, when he'd used a Yuuzhan Vong stun-bug to knock her out cold in a dirty spaceport alley. Everything else seemed to have changed.

She'd been just eighteen then, a pretty young *cheeka* but still just a kid. She'd definitely become a woman in six years, filling out to become more beautiful than ever but also, Jariah sensed, tougher, smarter, and more in control of her own emotions.

Back when Jariah and Cade had been slumming around the galaxy, taking occasional rest-stops at Bantha's repair shop, Jariah had had a lot of fun with Ahnah. Nothing serious-Droo's and Bantha's death-glances had warned him from getting intimate with the younger girl- but he'd enjoyed every minute of her youthful energy, wide-eyed wonder, and pretty face. Ahnah had been a far cry from the usual cheap *schuttas* he ran

into in his line of work and, he realized in retrospect, he hadn't thought too much about what she'd felt as he'd led her on. He'd just assumed she was along for a fun ride, nothing more.

It had become a lot harder to ignore how other people thought, even the ones he didn't like or care about. That was all down to the Force. Since it had been fried into him on Rohakalla, Jariah had gone through stages of adapting to its weird, unpredictable gifts. Usually it was a sixth sense, giving him unlikely insight into the thoughts and emotions of beings around him.

The Force was annoying; it's whispered gifts came and went and there was no telling for sure when he'd get little flashes of insight. According to Cade it was always like that. Gradually, Jariah had started to learn how to use the Force as well as just hear it, but that was still tricky. He was a man moved by passion and impulse, not Jedi serenity or Sith rage. Once, about six months after Rohakalla, he and Cade had gotten into a bar-fight and Jariah had slammed a Trandoshan's head into the nearest wall so hard it cracked the plaster. He hadn't meant to do it; he hadn't even laid a hand on the big lizard. It had just *happened*, and since then he'd taken a lot of lessons from Cade on how to control his invisible strength.

Jariah was still a man of passion and impulse and probably always would be, but after having the Force thrust on him he'd learned a new kind of self-control. Thanks to his new insight, he could tell Ahnah had learned that skill in a different way. She'd come through the door and greeted them all warmly: Blue first, then Cade, then Jariah, using the same smile for all of them. She'd patted R2 on the dome and gamely listened to C-3PO's run-on introduction, and after that asked her mother what had been in Bantha's secret stash.

Outwardly she acted like it was just a friendly visit, but Jariah could read her better now than when she'd been a fun, flirty teenager. She wanted to trust Cade, ached to, but couldn't allow herself to do so, not after she'd been burned in the past. As for Jariah, when she looked at him he picked up feelings that were flattering and frightening simultaneously.

Droo was a good host; she prepared a meal for them, with help from Skeeto and Ahnah. During dinner Cade did a bit of storytelling, explaining how they'd raided Rav's storehouse and picked up a shipful of allies, a long-lost Skywalker, and

one shiny protocol droid in the process. It was an exciting, entertaining yarn. Ahnah and the others seemed captivated. Jariah had a feeling Cade was talking about that so he couldn't have to talk about Rohakalla, or his dead uncle.

After he wound the tale down Droo remarked, "You said this woman's name was Ania *Solo*. And that she's a Skywalker."

"She's got the blood for it," Cade said. "Not the Force, though. Lucky her."

"Do you know about her parents?"

"I do, actually. In fact I've met her mom." Cade put down his fork and looked at Bantha's widow and kids. "In the time I've known her she's been Marin Skirata and Marin Solo. I think she used to be Marin Fel back in the day."

"And she's alive?" asked Droo.

"Last I checked. Which wasn't that long ago."

She got a slight, wistful smile. "Taller lady? Black hair?"

"It's pretty gray now. She said she knew Bantha, back when he was Nat Skywalker, Jedi apprentice."

"I know. I met her once."

"Really?"

"Yes. When we were setting up the hidden temple on Taivas... Nat explained to me that she was his cousin, and that she'd left the Jedi. And that she'd passed her lightsaber to him before he went."

"Huh." Cade frowned. "You mean that pretty gold blade?"

"The same. I always wondered what happened to that woman. Nat said he lost track of her when the Sith took over, but... I was never sure."

"Well, she's been through a story of her own, but it ain't mine to tell."

"I know. That's fine." Droo was still smiling. "I'm just glad a few old folks are still kicking."

Some, but not her husband. It was a bittersweet way to end the meal, and once it was over the group broke apart. Jariah knew if he left without doing this he'd be a coward, so he said, "Hey, Ahnah, want to take a walk?"

She bunched up her emotions as she looked at him, but she said, "Sure, Jariah. You just want to go around the compound?"

"Sounds fine to me," he said, and led her outside, a half-dozen eyes boring at their backs.

He was glad to get fresh air and privacy. Night had fallen over the Kiffex wastes and the air was cooling quickly. Hugging bare arms against his body he said, "I'm glad you're still with the Guardians. That uniform, it looks good on you. 'Course most things look good on you. But it seems right, you know."

They walked a few more steps around the compound's edge before she replied, "You used to be better at flirting."

She had him there. "Sorry. Must be getting rusty."

"I have a hard believing that," she said, but with a reluctant smile.

They walked a few more paces. Despite his nifty Force powers, Jariah suddenly had no idea what she was thinking. "Listen, *mesh'la*, what I did back there—"

"Was a long time ago."

"Well, it shouldn't have happened at all." She didn't disagree, didn't say a thing. In the dark he couldn't pick up much from her face either. "Did it get you in the *poodoo* with your bosses?"

"It didn't get my career as a Guardian off right. But like I said, that was a long time ago. Most people have forgotten about that."

"That's good."

They walked a little more, rounding the compound's main building and stepping into a patch of lightness night.

Ahnah stopped and faced him in the pitch-black. "Something's different about you, Jariah."

"Maybe you just remembered me different. It *was* a long time ago."

"No, I remembered you just fine, good and bad." She crossed her arms. "You used to be more..."

"What? Fun?"

She snorted. "That, and something else..."

"Don't tell me I've matured. *You've* grown up, not me."

"I think Cade's grown up."

"Cade's been through a lot. More than you or me- or anybody else- can know."

"I can tell you've been doing a lot more than robbing Rav."

"Like I said, you got no idea." He crossed his arms too. They faced each other in the dark, both uncertain. The Force, damn

it, was clamming up just when he needed it the most.

But the Force didn't just tell him things. It acted for him too. He said, "Do you want to know a secret?"

"You've got something for me, Jariah?"

"No, I mean, really. You gotta keep this one, understand?"

She shifted. Arms fell to her sides and one hand dangled near her holstered pistol. "I can keep secrets, Jariah. I kept Dad's for a long, long time. Cade's too."

"Right. Well, wait a second."

Staring into the dark, Jariah tried to do like Cade had taught him. He pushed aside all his worries about Ahnah and focused on the black space around them. He found Ahnah in that black space and felt her firmly with the Force, both as a living being and a sack of flesh.

He focused on the flesh- flesh he'd thought a lot about six years ago- and slowly, carefully, lifted it not the air.

In the darkness he didn't see Ahnah rise off her feet. He heard her gasp, felt her shock and fear in the Force. He held her a half-meter off the ground for just a few seconds, then carefully lowered her to the dirt.

The poised young policewoman was gone; now she strained to even speak. "Jariah... What the hells *was* that?"

"What did it feel like?"

"You know what it felt like. Did *you* do that?" She spun around, looking for Cade.

"That was all me."

Ahnah turned back to him. "How? How could you do that? You don't have the Force... do you?"

Jariah exhaled. "I didn't. Now I do."

"But how? Nobody has the Force. Nobody except-"

"I ain't a Skywalker, not by name or blood. When we said Cade's been searching high and low, looking for a way to get the Force back, we weren't kidding."

"But how could *you* get the Force back if you never had it to begin with?"

"Don't ask me to explain. I can't. What it comes down to, basically, as that I got the Force, well, forced on me. And now I'm just dealing with it."

"But... Where? If *you* could get the Force back-"

"The place I got this from don't exist anymore. One Jedi I

was with got his powers back too... but he died not long after. There's a few others like me roamin' the galaxy, people who got the Force but aren't Skywalkers. We're few and far between." He looked down at his hands, barely visible in the black. "I'm the only one who didn't want it."

They stood in silence for a long time as Ahnah found something to say. She came up with, "Are you handling it?"

"Yeah. Best I can. I haven't gone all dark side yet, which I thought I might when this all started."

"Why?"

"Well... I ain't a light side kinda guy."

She didn't argue, and he appreciated her honesty. Instead she asked, "Has Cade helped you?"

"Yeah. He's taught me to control this, best I can. And to use it. I still ain't *used* to it. Don't think I ever will be. I just make do."

His own dark inner urges tempted him all the time, but he'd never let himself really give in to them. He surprised himself that way. Having Cade and Blue around to keep him in line certainly helped; there was no underestimating the value of good friends. Cade had also once theorized the kind Force he'd been blasted with on Rohakalla had been of a different kind than the Jedi and Sith had been drawing on all those centuries. He'd described it as more pure, uncolored and untainted by the Whills, unified and unifying.

But Jariah barely understood any of that, and he wasn't going to attempt to explain it to Ahnah now. He felt her study him, felt her thoughts. He was surprised to find admiration there.

"I ain't done anything to be proud of," he said. He realized that stood for a lot of things, including their relationship, such as it had been.

"Dad always said Cade was more than what everyone thought he was. He said he could feel that in the Force."

"You don't need Force skills to know there's something special about Cade."

"He said the same thing about you."

Jariah stared at her silhouette. "*Poodoo*," he said.

She laughed, almost girlish. "He said the difference was, Cade *knew* what he really was but he buried it deep. You had no idea. Dad said you might find out, some day."

“Huh,” Jariah said. Even with the Force he couldn’t tell if she was saying the truth. He had to take it on faith. “Bet your da never expected this.”

“Probably not,” she admitted, “But he always told me the universe was full of surprises.”

“Well... Bantha was a smart man.”

Another silence, more comfortable than anything to have gone before. Then Ahnah told him, “Let’s head back inside. They’ll be wondering what we’ve been up to.”

She moved first into a pool of lamplight. As she kept walking around the building Jariah followed. “Like I said before, don’t go telling this to your Ma or Skeeto. Cade and Blue, they know, obviously. And the droids. But I don’t want this spreading far.”

As he came alongside her, she cast him a sideways glance. It was fond and sly and knowing, a woman’s not a girl’s, and he thought he could fall for her all over again.

With a little smile, Ahnah said, “Don’t sweat it, Jariah. Your secret’s safe with me.”

## Chapter Three

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It wasn't a hard thing to start a prison riot. Even though the inmates at Praxal VII knew, logically, they had no hope of escaping the asteroid jail, months or years of captivity had filled them with a restless and brewing anger. Because they knew they couldn't give it outlet to the guards, they gave it to each other. Prison gangs formed. Only egregious violence was punished. Hatreds mounted. The randomized pattern of releasing prisoners into common areas inhibited the spread of lethal grudges and divided clans, but it didn't stop the process.

As new guards on the cell block in Asteroid Besh, Ganner Krieg and Asaak Dan had been quietly propositioned by members of different gangs. They inmates had promised to trade small favors for a minute alone with their enemies. It was, Ganner gathered, their way of feeling out new staff and finding out who could be manipulated.

After just two weeks on the job, Ganner had taken bribes from two different gangs, Asaak from three. Leaders had all been promised they'd be released from their cells at a certain time, at which point they'd have a chance at their enemies.

Ganner and Asaak fully intended to keep their promises, though not in a way the inmates expected.

As the clock counted down, they'd joined Kyra and the two rebels she'd brought with her in Asteroid Besh's secondary security station. Two-dimensional screens filled an entire wall, showing feeds from every available camera in the cell block.

"You can open all the doors from here?" Kyra asked skeptically. "You have the authorization?"

"No, I don't have the authorization, but yes, I can open every



cell door simultaneously,” said Asaak Dan from his seat at the main control console. “With just a little slicing I got it set up to trigger an emergency override.”

“And just because the doors all open, you expect chaos.”

“We’ll get it,” Ganner said and pointed out a few screens. “Two gangs already have people in position. When the doors open they’ll be ready to move on their enemies. What they *don’t* know is that their enemies will be ready to move on them.”

“It does sound like a recipe for a brawl.” Kyra crossed her arms. “When do you trigger the override?”

Asaak glanced at his chrono. “If we keep to schedule, four standard minutes. You should stay here with us so we can escort you out of here when the chaos starts. There’s a pod waiting to take us to Asteroid Cresh.”

“Keep to the schedule,” Ganner said, and clapped his shoulders. “I’ll meet you at the pod.”

“Wait, what?” Kyra blinked. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“That prisoner you brought with you, Yana Oris. She’s in here for helping our resistance.”

“I know that, but...”

“She’s not the only rebel in this prison,” Asaak said. He was as surprised by Ganner’s announcement as Kyra, and more disapproving. “You can’t help them all.”

“I know. But the other rebels in here are soldiers, mostly. Oris is just an old woman. Even if she makes it through the riot, there’s no telling how long she’ll last.”

Asaak’s look was reproving, but he didn’t try to talk Ganner out of it. They knew each other well enough by now.

Kyra, however, said, “You’re risking the integrity of the whole mission.”

“No, I’m not. As soon as those doors open, I’ll grab Oris and run.”

“Through a kriffing a prison riot.”

His eyes dropped to the bulge on the side of her trousers. “If you give me your lightsaber, it would help our chances.”

Her face was admirably stiff, but he could tell she was mentally weighing the benefit of helping Ganner with the risk of losing her weapon. Finally, reluctantly, she reached into the

hidden compartment and drew out the metal cylinder.

"I'm getting this back," she said firmly.

"Yes, you are. I only need it for a minute." Ganner took the weapon, familiar but so alien. It was a relic from another time, another life.

"Three minutes," Asaak warned. "Get going, Ganner. And good luck."

Nobody said *May the Force be with you* anymore, not unless they were being sarcastic. Ganner stuck the lightsaber into his belt at his right side, where the swinging of his arm could help conceal it, then stepped out of the security room.

From here it was an easy jog to the lift; no more than thirty seconds. Another thirty seconds to ride the lift to level eight of the cell block. Yana Oris' cell was on the far end of the long walkway and with effort, Ganner slowed his pace to walk down it deliberately, like a guard on patrol. He tried to count the next one-hundred and twenty seconds in his head and time it so he'd reach the cell right when the doors opened, but he was anxious, and seconds passed faster mentally than they did in real time. When he reached Oris' closed cell he was forced to loiter for an excruciating extra minute, looking up and down at the cell block, briefly catching the eye of other guards who had no idea what was about to happen.

And then, as one, the cell doors opened. In those crucial opening seconds there was stunned silence from the guards and nearly all the prisoners, save those pouncing on their enemies and the enemies poised to fight back. In that moment Ganner rushed into the cell to find the woman lying face-up but awake on her bed. Oris tried to sit upright but Ganner grabbed her upper arm and tugged her off the bed. She stumbled but he straightened to her feet.

She blinked dazedly. "Young man... What the devil..."

"I'll explain later," Ganner said and moved his hand to her wrist. "Come with me. *Now.*"

Without another word, he tugged her out the door and into the walkway. She stumbled but kept up with him as he veered toward the lift through which he'd come. The walkways were filling up with prisoners now, most surprised and cautious, but there was already a violent brawl on the level directly below them. Ganner looked across the shaft and saw another guard,

three levels down, beings mobbed by two inmates. He winced as they knocked him to the ground, grabbed his weapon, and fired it into the air. The tang of blaster bolts was like the scent of blood for akk hounds; prisoners gave loud cheers and alarms starting wailing.

Ganner broke into a jog, the fastest he could go with the older woman dragged behind him. He glanced over-shoulder and saw she was doing her best to keep up, even though she was still confused. When he looked ahead he saw three guards rushing into the walkway cradling blaster rifles. Stun-batons were affixed like bayonets to their barrels. Even a graze by one of those might drop him and Ganner tried to push through before they realized what he was doing.

No such luck. The moment they saw Oris dragged behind him they knew something was wrong. Ganner still had a fleeting second's surprise, so he released Oris and barreled shoulder-first into one guard, keeling him forward, then snapped an armored elbow into his temple. He grunted as he was dropped; the other two guards swung toward him and raised his rifles.

That was when Ganner ignited the lightsaber. Kyra's weapon, he knew, had originally belonged to the Sith apprentice Eli Horn, and while she'd kept the handle the same she'd installed a new focusing crystal. The blade that extended was pure white, like an Imperial Knight's, and with the flick of the wrist, Ganner's colorless blazing fan sheared the barrels and bayonets of both rifles.

That stunned the guards again and gave Ganner time to draw his own service pistol and pump a stun blast into each of them. Three bodies dropped to the floor, a big pile of blue armor. For the guards' sakes, Ganner hoped they'd be ignored by the rioters while unconscious. The sound of laserfire was echoing through the cell block, and he guessed more prisoners had gotten their hands on guns.

Ganner shut off the lightsaber and stuck it in his belt, but he kept the blaster firmly gripped. He held his free hand out over the prone bodies to Yana Oris, who stared at him in confusion and shock.

"What *are* you?" she gasped.

Ganner didn't have a good answer that; he hadn't had one for four years. But right here and now, one thing was clear. "I'm

your best chance of staying alive,” he told her. “But we need to move now.”

Oris hesitated for a second more, then reached out and took it. She stumbled over the stunned guards, then joined Ganner in sprinting for the lift.

Though her feet were planted on the deck and the tunnel to Asteroid Cresh stretched out ahead of her, Kyra felt a sense of vertigo as she stared into the kilometer-long shaft. One passenger pod was riding the rails into Asteroid Besh now, and from the elevated platform on which she stood, she could watch as the pod docked and a full dozen guards with armor and riot gear emerged.

“So far so good,” muttered Taige, one of the two undercover rebels who’d joined her in bringing the prisoners aboard Praxal VII. Neither he nor his partner, Rolvis, were much older than Kyra.

“It’s a start,” she agreed, and turned her eyes from the pod below to the heavy cargo carrier docked at their platform. Along with a wealth of sundry supplies, it also contained five barrels of dirilium nitrate and the rigger power-pack that would overload on command. She felt anxious just standing close to the explosive material; by Asaak Dan’s own admission, a stray laser blast could set it off, and she didn’t know what Ganner would bring with him after escaping the cell block.

The Togruta was anxiously checking his wrist chrono. They had a tight schedule to keep, and Ganner was already slowing them down. The one good thing was that nobody had asked them why four guards were loitering in the transit bay when there was a riot going on; the chaos in the cell block was indeed the distraction they’d hoped for.

When Ganner appeared he came running, dragging an out-of-breath older woman by the hand and thankfully no guards. As soon as the two of them clambered up the platform, Ganner tossed the lightsaber to Kyra, who guided it into her waiting hand with a subtle nudge of the Force.

The woman- Yana Oris, that was it- was too dazed to notice Kyra’s trick. Heaving for breath she asked, “Please, tell me what’s going on! Who *are* you people?”

“We’re *your* people, miss,” said Asaak as ushered her onto

the cargo pod. "And no offense, but we didn't stage this jail-break just for you. We're after Admiral Stazi."

"Stazi? He's here?"

"All our sources say he's on Asteroid Cresh, solitary confinement. Now everybody, strap in. We're going zero-g."

There were a set of seats at the front of the cargo pod, and all six passengers quickly strapped in. Kyra's body and head felt light as the pod pushed into the transit tube. The old woman still looked confused and anxious, and Kyra wondered how the hell they could afford to protect her when breaking Stazi out of jail. The riot would clear some guards out of Asteroid Cresh but not all, and things could still get rough. She had a feeling Ganner hadn't thought about that complication at all; he'd just been trying to do the right thing.

Well, the right thing wasn't always the smart thing. That was one of those lessons Kyra had learned the hard way over the past three years.

But since they'd been saddled with the old woman, they'd have to do their best. The cargo pod reached the docking space on Asteroid Cresh in a few minutes. The platform and surrounding zone were a perfect mirror to the one on Besh. All six passengers quickly unstrapped from their seats and left the pod.

"Are we ready to send it back?" Taige asked Asaak.

The Togruta fished out his comlink and thumbed it on. "This is Dan. Are you there? Report."

Kyra heard a tinny voice reply, "Standing by on Cresh."

"Good. We just arrived. Package loaded?"

"Ready to send it back to Grek. Are you?"

"Yes. Send it as soon as you're ready." Asaak thumbed off the comm. "You heard him. Let's go."

Ganner nodded and went to the platform control console. With a few taps he sent the cargo pod sailing back toward Asteroid Besh. As Kyra watched it push away, she saw another passenger pod moving in the same direction. Once they blew theirs there'd be little hope for the guards in the other capsule, who thought they were on the way to putting down a riot.

Sacrifices, Kyra thought grimly. She said, "Let's get clear."

As Ganner took her hand, Yana Oris said, "I don't understand. What's happening?"

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Kyra said gruffly and hurried for the blast doors. “Asaak, are we ready to blow?”

“Very.” He got to the door, peeked into the empty corridor beyond, then waved the others through. Kyra waited until Ganner pulled Oris through, then followed. Once all six were inside she slammed the controls and sealed the door tight. Through the transparisteel porthole window she looked out into the docking area and saw the big cargo pod shrink further as it receded down the tube.

“Any time,” she told Asaak.

“Got it,” he said, and tapped the controller in his pocket.

A second later, the cargo pod exploded. The sound was muted but vibration shook their hallway hard. The fireball quickly ate up the limited atmosphere in the transit tube, which became instantly clogged with floating debris. Kyra lost sight of the passenger pod, but likely it had been torn to shreds.

“Well,” she muttered, “That’ll do it.”

A mere second later they felt another rumble. Likely that was the other cargo pod exploding, the passage to Asteroid Grek sealing just as this one had been.

It meant Asteroid Cresh was all on its own now, and so were they.

“That’ll do it,” said Taige. “Do we send the standby signal?”

“We do,” Kyra said.

She reached into her pocket and thumbed the transmitter there. The pulse it sent out was short-range and brief, but the stealth drone sitting on the edge of the Praxal system would pick it up and relay it to the rebel base. That was their allies’ signal to get ready to provide evac. She’d send a second signal when they grabbed Stazi, at which point their escape ship would drop out of hyperspace, get through Asteroid Cresh’s hopefully-disabled shields, and latch onto an airlock that would take them and the rescued admiral the hell out of here.

There was still so much that could go wrong, but so far so good, or so it seemed.

Kyra gave one last look at the wreckage-choked shaft, then joined the others in hurrying down the hall.

As Gar Stazi sat on his bunk, slowly chewing his breadroll after sipping down most of his soup, his mind started to whirl

in familiar circles. It had no place else to go in a cage like this, and after years of captivity he was losing mental discipline. Thoughts led where he didn't want them to go and he could do nothing to stop them.

*It could have been different.* That was the worst spin to be caught in. He'd made a fatal mistake when he'd rushed off to the Outer Rim to fight the Ssi-ruuk himself. He should have left the campaign to Jhoram and Slossar, both good admirals, but he'd gotten so frustrated with politics on Coruscant that he'd been overeager to play soldier again. To fight simple wars and be a simple hero, as he had been before.

That had been vainglory. He saw that now. It could have been different. He should have stayed on Coruscant and done his appointed duty as co-leader of the Federation. He had no idea what he would have done to save Marasiah from the second assassination attempt; even if he'd failed there he'd at least have been able to keep the situation from spiraling out of control.

He wouldn't have ended up in this cell. Some how, some way, things would have been different.

But they weren't, and instead Stazi had that spiral of regret always waiting to snare his mind and drag him down.

He struggled to reorient his thoughts. There was so little to latch onto here in this cell. Blank walls, clean floor, cool recycled air. He tried to switch regret for longing. He fought to remember what breeze felt like on his face. He struggled for remembered flavors of fresh air and the random patter of rain; sonic showers were no real substitute.

Without any of those good and natural things Stazi was a dead man. This prison was his tomb. He knew that and knowing was filled with desire, not just for fresh air but for agency. He'd always believed that beings were defined by their actions and had done his best to act in a way he'd wanted to be remembered. In here he could not act, but if he did get out one day-

-no, not if, *when*, he thought, struggling for hope-

-then he would set things right. Even if Chalk had brought stability to the galaxy it didn't erase his crimes. Peace built on injustice was no real peace. *When* he was freed, he'd expose Chalk's lie. He'd redeem Jhoram Bey and all the other good

soldiers who'd died. And for good measure, he'd find Marasiah Fel's *real* killers.

Regret, longing, resolution. His mind had gone through these circles too many times to count. In the end he remained in the same empty cell, eating the same food and fighting the same losing battle to stay sane.

Stazi tried to stay focused on his longing. When he desired, he had something to live for. Even if the *when* and *how* eluded him, he still had a *what* to dream of. It was all he had, but it was reason to live. Reason to keep on doing what he had been doing since the prison doors slammed shut.

To wait and hold to hope.



## Chapter Four

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It has been just three years since Shumavar had been overrun by Nagai raiders and consecrated a part of the Ssi-Ruuvi Imperium, but you could hardly tell by looking. Despite its location on the Hydian Way, the planet was lightly populated with only a few major settlements dotted across its three temperate continents. Apparently it had surrendered to the invaders without a fight and allowed their armies to run rampant. That had lasted barely a month before Darth Nihil's assassination at Bakura and the collapse of the Nagai/Ssi-Ruuvi alliance. The saurian raiders had picked a few worlds to bunker down on and defend, but not this one. For Shumavar, the last campaign of the Sith had come and gone like a fever dream.

Talon supposed she could have taken it as another lesson in humility, but she was long past sick of those. Instead, she followed her guide down a backstreet of the planet's largest spaceport town. Three-story buildings, quaintly made of brick and mortar, crowded on either side. Xahn Carr led her to a door over which a flickering sign read: KORWAN'S KORNER – HALF PRICE WEEKNITES 17 TO 20.

The place was as unimpressive inside as it was outside. At this time- a weeknight, 1800 hours local time and thus within range of the advertisement- the place was mostly empty. The ceiling was low and oppressive; a few beings sat spaced staccato along the bar, one on every other stool. A few more crowded at booths in the far corners. On instinct, Talon scoured the scene for threats. Most of the patrons were human or near-human; none looked less than twice her age and most were

twice her mass. None of them were fighting fit.

None of them looked at her either, nor at Xahn Carr. One was a Twi'lek, tattooed in the scarlet and black colors of the One Sith who had raised her from childhood to be Darth Krayt's Hand. The other was a Yuuzhan Vong who'd undergone his own tattooing, plus some ritual scarification, before joining Khat Lah's band of mystics and ultimately opening himself up to the Force. The few patrons who glanced at them didn't look twice. Such as was the power of ooglith masquers, which made them both look like normal humans.

In her time with Khat Lah's band, Talon had almost gotten used to wearing one, but the organic disguise still felt claustrophobic as it clung to her, literally as a second skin. Hers didn't hide her lekku- the hood of her cloak did that- but it turned her scarlet and black face to a pink shade common for humans. Xahn Carr's did an even more effective job; the Yuuzhan Vong took off his hood entirely, showing off the bearded face, broad forehead, and hairless, scarless scalp his masquer afforded.

As Xahn Carr looked across the bar, a single being sitting in one corner raised a hand to beckon them over. Xahn Carr went first, Talon as his shadow. None of the other patrons tracked them as they walked to the booth and sat down on either side of their host.

The Koorivar's name, Talon had been told, was Lassayne. The green-skinned, horned being was apparently one of many rare antique dealers Khat Lah had come into contact with over the years.

Lassayne looked between them as they sat down. To Xahn Carr he said, "I was expecting your boss."

"Reikar is busy," Xahn Carr said simply. He spoke Basic with only a mild accent and was the most fluent in the group after Khat Lah himself.

The Koorivar swung his gaze to Talon. "And you... you're certainly a new addition to the crew. I'd have remembered you."

She wasn't new; she'd been with Khat Lah almost three years now, traversing the galaxy on his organic Sekotan flyer, desperately seeking for another way to regain the Force after being cruelly denied it on Rohakalla.

But she said, "I'm sorry we haven't met before." Which was already a lie; she knew she wouldn't like Lassayne one bit.

The Koorivar settled back in the booth and put a hand on the rectangular case beside him. "Even if your boss didn't come himself, I'm ready to deal."

"Let's see the merchandise first," said Xahn Carr.

Lassayne opened the case's lid without placing it on the table. From the padded interior, he took out a set of three objects, each the size of Talon's clenched fist. Barring chipping and scratches they were identical: carved from stone, eight-sided, like two pyramids joined together on the broadest point.

Very much, Talon thought, like the Tho Yor they'd found on Tython. That object had guided them to Rohakalla and might have guided them to another Force-rich planet, but Eli Horn had acted too quickly, and with Hogrum Chalk's help had destroyed the Tho Yor from orbit with a massive turbolaser volley.

Talon had trained Eli as a Sith for years; he'd understood what he was really made of until then. On some level she felt responsible for the damage he'd wrought, and she knew Khat Lah did too.

"The structure is familiar," she told Lassayne. "But also common."

"You told me you were looking for objects with this specific shape." He stroked one stone. "You also said they had to have documented ties to local pre-Republic culture on the planet of origin. That's exactly what these are."

"Where are they from?" asked Xahn Carr.

"Ando Prime. Not *Ando* Ando, the Aqualish homeworld, but the planet furthest from the system primary."

"I am familiar with the Ando system," Talon said.

"Then do you know about the Dai Bendu?" Lassayne raised one brow.

"That order originated on the planet Thape." She and Khat Lah had already been to that world.

"Ah. Beautiful *and* knowledgeable." Lassayne smiled at Xahn Carr. "Where did you find this one?"

Talon resisted the urge to hurt this Koorivar. "Was there a Dai Bendu center there?" she asked.

"There still is. Very small, very private. I'm surprised Jedi

enthusiasts like yourselves haven't been there."

Talon glanced at Xahn Carr, wondering how much this antique dealer knew about Khat Lah and his companions. The masquered Yuuzhan Vong said, "What do these objects have to do with the Dai Bendu?"

"Nowadays they're considered good luck charms. And, of course, they fetch good price on the resale market." Lassayne grinned again, showing pointy teeth. "According to local legend, the monks used to carry them around as prayer talismans. More of a ritualistic thing."

"Is there any explanation as to the shape?" asked Talon.

"That's the uncertain part. They say there's a long history of images with this double-pyramid on Ando Prime, going back thousands and thousands of years. Maybe to when the Dai Bendu came there. I've seen holos of old relief carvings that make it look like they even worshipped the things." He stroked the stone again. "Mind you, Ando Prime's mostly frozen over. Mountains and snow. There's really no telling what's buried under all that stuff. Could be many, many more of these. Could be the temple or whatever they worshipped at."

"A trip to Ando Prime may be in order," Talon admitted.

"Thank you for the information," said Xahn Carr, and reached for an envelope of hard credits he kept in his jacket.

"Ah-ah-ah, hold on." Lassayne held up a hand. "You're not interested in purchasing one of these fine antiques?"

"I don't know if that's really necessary," said Xahn Carr, "Given what you've already told us."

"Your boss isn't so hasty. Or so cheap." The Korivar picked up one stone and held it high. "He'd at least like to take a look at one of these. Maybe take it to Ando Prime and see if there are monks he can ask about it. Or maybe stick it under a high-powered scanner and see if there's anything inside the stone. I've never cracked one open myself-" he smacked it into his other palm- "since they're so sturdy. But if I were your boss, I'd want to investigate closer."

He was right, but Talon rankled at his attitude. Once she would have used the Force to steal the item from his hand; very likely she'd have silenced the aggravating Korivar entirely with a lightsaber-thrust or a twist of Force-grip around his neck, and felt good about doing so afterward.

She still had an urge to do harm to this being... but she no longer had the power, and though she grieved the loss of the Force she admitted there was a certain clarity that came from removing herself from the dark side's power. Killing Lassayne, even hurting him, might hurt them in the long run. He was annoying, but also useful.

Therefore, she watched as Xahn Carr bartered for one of the stones. Lassayne, as expected, haggled hard and Talon had to fight the urge to snap his neck there in the booth. The price they paid for just one stone was considerable but Xahn Carr seemed content with the deal, though not as content as Lassayne. After taking the object they slid out from either end of the booth, leaving the Koorivar alone there once more, and made their way out of Korwan's Korner.

As they walked down the narrow darkening street, Xahn Carr said, "I could feel your anger there."

Of course he could; unlike her, the Yuuzhan Vong had the Force. After three years it still seemed preposterous sometimes.

"He was... an aggravating creature." Her first instinct had been to call him *vermin*. The One Sith had used that term as blanket derision for non-Force users, but now she was vermin too, as vermin as Lassayne.

"You restrained your anger. That is good. And we got what we wanted."

"Is that stone really worth anything?"

"Perhaps. We will see."

"This may all be a false lead. Have you heard of a Dai Bendu monastery on Ando Prime?"

"I believe Khat Lah may have mentioned it."

"Then he may have been there already. Also, this stone he sold us... The design is so simple. Yes, it looks like a Tho Yor, but it could easily be derived from something else."

"I know. We will see the truth of that too."

Like his leader, this Yuuzhan Vong could be so aggravatingly calm, so sanguine, so... Jedi-like.

Xahn Carr felt her annoyance and flashed a tight, pointy grin. "Calm, Talon. By now you should know the importance of patience."

She did, for better or worse. At different times during her travels with Khat Lah they'd seemed aggravatingly close to

finding a lead, only to dash against false hopes. The Yuuzhan Vong took each defeat better than her, but Talon knew she had no place else to go. She was lucky to be roaming the galaxy free at all, though she had a feeling that if she tried to strike out on her own, these Force-imbued Yuuzhan Vong would stop her, and she'd be powerless against them. It was something she'd thought about putting to the test, but never tried.

Losing the Force had stolen her strength. Losing the Sith had stolen her purpose. Searching for the Force with these aliens was purpose of a sort, the only kind she had left. If she abandoned it she'd have nothing and be nothing, so she stayed with them.

They retraced their steps through the night streets until they reached the landing pad. As usual, their Sekotan flyer was secure in a private berth. Prying eyes were always struck by the organic ship for its wide wings, smooth emerald hull, and seeming lack of propulsion. None ever knew what it was. Even if the whole galaxy still feared Yuuzhan Vong, nobody knew what a dovin basal looked like anymore.

Once they got inside the ship, they released their masquers. Xahn Carr tapped the nose on his face and the creature peeled away, revealing the scarred face, tattooed cheeks, and sloping forehead of an unmasquered warrior.

When Talon tapped her own, her masquer broke apart, curling away from her lekku and receding to the back of her neck. For every inch of tattooed skin it peeled away from she felt pain; even when it had entirely removed itself from her face, stinging remained in her cheeks and on her scalp. She hissed and flexed her face, massaging the pain away.

"I've told you before, we have masquers that do not cause hurt to remove."

She turned and looked down the corridor to see Khat Lah approaching. Unlike many of his men, this Yuuzhan Vong did not have scars or marks on his face. His long hair, black streaked with gray, fell from his high scalp and spread across his shoulders.

"You know my reasons," Talon said, carefully removing the bunched-up oogolith masquer from the back of her neck.

"Just because some of our warriors still believe in the sanctity of pain doesn't mean you have to."

"It is not a Sith affectation," she said icily. "If I don't stay used to pain, I will get soft."

Khat Lah regarded her, perhaps probing with the Force to see if she believed. In truth, Talon didn't know. The Sith were gone; their teaching were just words. Gradually, reluctantly, Talon had come to admit the error to some of it and recognize how the Sith's actions and arrogance had led to their demise.

That didn't mean she was willing to embrace Jedi platitudes about inner peace. After all, the Jedi were gone too.

After watching her for a moment, Khat Lah said, "Pain can be many useful things, as well as dangerous ones. In the end we must decide which is which on our own."

"I'm glad we're in agreement." Talon was sick of talking about this.

The Yuuzhan Vong spread his hands. "What did your meeting with Lassayne get you?"

Xahn Carr, who'd watched that exchange in silence, took out the Tho Yor-shaped stone they'd bought and explained what Lassayne had told them about the Dai Bendu and Ando Prime.

"I am aware of the monastery there. I visited briefly, before I went to Tython and found the Tho Yor." Khat Lah lifted the stone in one hand and regarded it. "The Talid monks were not welcoming to outsiders. Perhaps if I had understood them better at the time I might have won their graces."

"Will we go there now?" asked Talon.

"I believe that would be wise. Ando Prime is not so far from here." He gave the stone back to Xahn Carr. "Perform a non-intrusive scan and see if there is anything interesting. Tell Neshri Buhl to begin plotting a course to Ando Prime, but only after we have totally resupplied."

Xahn Carr nodded and made his way down the corridor. Talon looked at the crumpled, pink-skinned masquer in her hand. She'd have to take it to the nutrient baths in the rear chamber of the ship so it could feed and rejuvenate for its next use. Not for the first time, she missed the days when she could proudly show her Sith-stamped face to the galaxy.

"There is no point in growing maudlin," Khat Lah said, "We seem to have a lead."

Sometimes Talon truly hated being the only vermin on a ship full of Force-sensitives. "It may all come to nothing."

“It may. But even then, it should prove interesting. You should think, Talon, on what kind of questions you want to ask the Dai Bendu monks.”

“About the Tho Yor?”

“About any number of things. Even if you are not wholly honest with them, I imagine you would have things to talk about.”

With that he turned and walked down the corridor, leaving her alone. Talon looked at the masquer again. Yes, she probably could have an interesting talk with those Force-worshipping Talid monks. Conversation was not one of the skills the Sith had taught her, but she’d already accepted there were great gaps in her education.

When she’d first joined him, Khat Lah had remarked that she’d spent so long as a ‘what’ that she had no idea how to be a ‘who.’ That was one of those things she’d had to learn herself, bit by bit, but Talon knew she had a long way to go.



## Chapter Five

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The assault carrier *Paramount* was admittedly no fearsome warship. Almost fifty years old, it had been mustered out of the Alliance fleet at the end of the Sith-Imperial War and sold off to the system defense fleet on Celanon. It had recently been retired from service there, but a friendly local official had quietly allowed the rebel movement to take it as their own.

*Paramount's* firepower was modest, its shields outdated, but its communications suite was top-notch, and thus it had become a mobile command post for the rebels' efforts. The situation room behind the bridge was cramped and tense as they waited for the signal. The infiltration teams aboard Praxal VII were supposed to send one standby signal to the drone floating inert at the edge of the star system, followed by a second signal announcing that an extraction team was needed. From there, the team would start an active beacon that would lead the waiting shuttle to their exit point from the asteroid prison.

There were many things that could go wrong with the plan, but it was still their best chance to rescue Gar Stazi from the hands of the enemy. The raid had been months in the making, starting with intelligence leaks from Coruscant as to the admiral's location, which was itself a secret carefully guarded by Hogrums Chalk's government. If they managed to rescue him, Stazi would find himself commander of a paltry ragtag fleet, all older vessels and barely enough of them to defend a sector, but it would be enough. His presence alone would give them a critical morale boost.

Strange, Saara Derrol thought, that all her hopes should rest on Stazi. In her past life, as a dark side adept and daughter of

Lord Krayt's right hand, Stazi had been the enemy, a sharp thorn in the One Sith's side. Her life had started to reverse even before the Force had disappeared; she'd gone into hiding after her father's failed attempt to usurp Krayt's throne, then seduced Porat Derrol, one of Stazi's ex-soldiers and an ambitious would-be member of the new Galactic Federation legislature.

Then the Force had gone silent, and it had changed everything. All the powers that had ruled her life deserted her. More astonishing, she found herself in love with Porat and even his ideals, so different from the ones she'd been raised with. Most astonishing of all, when she'd confessed what she'd been, he'd accepted and forgave her.

The Sith had never taught her how powerful love could be, or how bitterly it could hurt.

Porat had been killed along with most of Jhoram Bey's fleet. No, not killed, slaughtered by Chalk's merciless forces. She'd tried to put a Sith's anger behind her, but in the months after Porat's death she'd embraced it and let it fuel her. She knew, intellectually, that the resistance to Chalk's rule was next to nothing. Even its would-be political allies in the Senate had turned their backs after the staged attack on Galactic City. They were lonely rebels, fighting insurmountable odds to liberate a galaxy that didn't even want their help.

Their cause was doomed, but Saarai had thrown herself into it anyway. Love and anger made a strange combination, but it motivated like nothing else.

That the rebels had welcomed a senator's young widow into their inner circle spoke to their dire straits. As Saarai looked around the situation room's circular table she marked the faces that had grown familiar. There was Sukharr, the Trandoshan general who'd spent most of the war against Krayt in an Imperial prison and acted eager to make up for the fight he's lost. There was Lonel Starets, a young human and fourth officer on Jhoram Bey's *Alliance*. He'd been the highest-ranking survivor of the dead flagship and now captained *Paramount*. And there was Ekorian, the stout, furry Drall who'd been Alliance intelligence director during the Sith-Imperial war and had come out of retirement to join their cause.

They were something, but they wouldn't turn the fate of the

galaxy. Stazi could, and they all waited with held breath until the green light at the center of the table flared on.

Starets checked his datapad, which was connected to *Paramount's* comm system. "We have it," he said. "That's the first signal."

"Excellent," growled Sukharr. "Signal Commander Dahl to stand by and prepare her jump."

Starets tapped his pad, then said, "Done."

And that was it. More breathless waiting in this dark room. Once Anj Dahl and her extraction team jumped into the Praxal system *Paramount* would get a more detailed read-out of the situation, but until that time came, the only thing they could do was wait.

Saarai tried to be patient. They'd sent a mere seven beings to infiltrate the prison. Forging seven false Federation Correctional Authority IDs had been risky in itself, even with Ekorian's connections. Four of those infiltrators had been on-site for weeks; three more were fresh arrivals. Seven agents, against an entire prison. Saaraï reminded herself that these were not ordinary agents. Though Ganner Krieg and Asaak Dan had lost the Force four years ago they'd fought well for the rebels, fueled by skill and passion. Most useful of all, though, was undoubtedly Kyra.

Saarai had listened to the young woman's story when she'd come to them, offering help. The other rebel leaders, who'd never known the Force, had found it all hard to believe, but Saaraï accepted it. It seemed to her that Kyra, who'd barely touched the Force before regaining it on that surreal world in the galaxy's deepest core, was living a reversal of Saaraï's life. They'd come to the same place, but their transformations were inversions. In losing the Force, Saaraï had been liberated from the shackles of Sith doctrine and had become something more. For Kyra, gaining the Force meant she had to shoulder a terrible weight, one that could never settle comfortably on the shoulders of someone raised to believe she was nothing. The toll of the past three years showed on her face and in her eyes. Saaraï's heart ached for the human.

Not that she could ever tell Kyra any of this. That she'd once been Darth Wyyrlok's daughter was a secret she'd shared only with Porat. He'd taken it with him in death. The secret

belonged to Saaraï alone now; Saaraï and Talon, last of the Sith, wherever she was now, if she thought herself Sith anymore.

Saaraï took a deep breath. All of that was out of her control now. She could only watch, wait, and hope Kyra came through and liberated Stazi.

After all this time, after all she'd been through, Saaraï had to trust in the Force. The irony was so bitter she almost smiled in the dark.

The maximum-security section in Asteroid Cresh was a maze of identical gray corridors, but Ganner had burned the path to Stazi's cell in his memory. As he led the way, the group of six kept up the pretense of proper action for the staff still in this asteroid. Yana Oris was actually helpful in that regard; the guards were on high alert after the tunnels to Besh and Grek had been shut down, but the few that stopped and noticed their group were swayed by the sight of the middle-aged prisoner in stun cuffs. That, and Kyra's gentle push of the Force.

That got them through the outer layers, but Stazi was being kept in the very center of the asteroid, in a region staffed entirely by droids. Neither Ganner nor Asaak had clearance for that area, which meant Kyra's lightsaber was going to have to cleave through the barricades and whatever droid defenders were inside.

When they had the corridor to themselves, Ganner and Asaak exchanged brief comm-bursts with the last two rebel infiltrators inside the prison. After blowing the tunnel to Asteroid Grek, Ahlegarr and Cev'mor had split up. The former had gone straight for the nearest power conduit and cut the cables that powered Cresh's shield generator. The latter had secured the tunnel to the surface airlock nearest Stazi's cell. By the time they reached the gateway to the prison's most secure cell block, everything was in place.

They stopped in front of the blast doors. A single bug-eye holocam above the frame stared balefully down at them. There was no point in trying their identification cards; hard entry was the only way. Ganner just hoped they could do it the least-hard was possible. There were still enough guards in Cresh to cause them serious trouble.

Shooting out the camera would have been easy, but it would also have raised alarms. Instead Kyra stepped forward, glanced up at its mirror-black hemisphere, then closed her eyes. A second later she opened them and said, "Done."

"What's done?" asked Oris nervously. They'd filled the older woman in on some of the plan, but she clearly had no idea who Kyra was or what she could do.

"You're sure the camera's down?" asked Asaak.

"I've jammed it," Kyra said, then reached into her trouser pocket and drew out the lightsaber. Gripping it steadily in both hands, she flicked on the pure-white blade and stabbed it into the door. Metal burned on either side of the insertion point and with slow, deliberate movement she carved a jagged, molten oval into the blast door. Most security portals in this station set off alarms if the doorframes registered a hard impact. Hopefully, by cutting through the door but not touching the threshold, Kyra would avoid triggering Cresh's security.

And if she did, well, they were prepared to fight. Ganner, Asaak, Taige, and Rolvis took out their rifles and made sure they were set to kill. Ganner touched the controls to the stun cuffs and released Oris. As Kyra finished her oval he whispered to the woman, "Keep behind me and keep your head down. Do you understand?"

Oris nodded shakily. "Sounds simple."

In a way it would be; once they got Stazi it would be fight or die. When Kyra finally carved her hole in the door she stepped back and extended a hand. The section she'd cut out of the door jerked free and hovered through the air toward her. Oris gasped softly. Kyra lowered the oval chunk of metal to the floor with barely a sound.

Then, taking the lightsaber in both hands, she looked over her shoulder, gave her companions a nod, then bounded through.

Ganner and Asaak came up behind her, Taige and Rolvis in the rear. Ganner whispered directions, guiding them through the halls. The gray corridors looked empty until, suddenly, a skeletal droid appeared from a corner bend. Its wrist-mounted laser cannons fired immediately but Kyra was there to deflect the bolts back against its steel frame, then duck low and cut the droid in two with a single horizontal swipe.

There'd be more where they came from. The six of them

charged ahead; now Ganner plainly shouted directions as they hooked one corner, then another and a third before finally reaching a stretch of corridor with just a single plain door: the entrance to Stazi's cell. Two droids were waiting for them and Kyra bounded fearlessly to attack. At the same time two more droids appeared behind; Ganner shoved Oris to the ground and joined Asaak, Taige, and Rolvis in firing at them. Their first round of laser blasts panged against the droids' armored chasses but Asaak, a good shot, landed his second blast dead in the center of the right droid's four photoreceptors. Its head sparked but it still fired wildly and dangerously. The second droid popped off a volley of concentrated stun shots. Ganner barely dodged one but Rolvis took a blue bolt in the arm. He grunted and staggered as half his body went numb; Ganner fired over his slumped shoulder and knocked the second droid onto its back with a barrage of full-strength rifle-shots.

As Taige bent to help Rolvis, Ganner came around just in time to see Kyra cleave one droid through diagonally, shoulder to hip. Then she spun on the second one, ably deflecting shot after shot until she cut off one arm. With a push from the Force she knocked the droid off-balance, giving her an opening to thrust her blade through the center of its head. A twist of the wrist sliced through the metal skull, and one more flick severed head from shoulders. With a loud clank, the second droid fell atop the body of the first.

Kyra was panting from exertion, but when she looked at Ganner her eyes were alive with triumph. He remembered how she'd first started out when she'd joined the resistance after the massacre of Admiral Bey's fleet. She'd been new to her powers but eager to learn, even from Force-deaf ex-knights like Ganner and Asaak. She'd possessed poise and confidence that belied her years, but the first battles had been difficult. With cruel experience she'd gained mastery of her weapon, her body, and gradually the Force itself.

He knew, once upon a time, there'd been a woman they called the Sword of the Jedi. The Jedi were gone but Kyra was the sword of the resistance; their invincible fighter, their torch-bearer, their symbol of resilience. It was a hard fate for someone so young, but at moments like this, moments of triumph, she seemed to savor it.

“Status,” she ordered.

As he helped Oris to her feet, Asaak said, “I’m alright.”

“Me too,” added Ganner.

“I’m fine, but Taige is shaky,” Rolvis said as he pulled the other upright.

“I can handle it,” the other man said, though he didn’t look in a position to go sprinting for the exit, which was what they’d likely have to do. With those droids downed, live guards were certainly on the way.

There was no time to hesitate. Kyra took her lightsaber and stabbed it through the door to Stazi’s cell. That metal was thinner than the blast doors at the section entrance and with four smooth motions she carved a portal into it. With another tug from the Force she dragged the cut-off half of the door into the hallway and let it clatter to the floor.

She went into cell. Ganner followed and nearly knocked into her back coming through; she’d frozen one step inside. He sidestepped her, looked, and saw the four-walled room, the simple bed on the opposite wall, and the single occupant: a leather-skinned, beaked and crested Nosaurian staring at them in shock.

It was Oris who, peering through the cut-open door, exclaimed, “Senator Nelloran!”

“Who are you people?” the Nosaurian snapped. His eyes were drawn to Kyra’s still-blazing saber. “Is this... a rescue?”

Ganner’s mind whirled. He was *sure* Stazi would be here; it was easily the most secure cell in the entire prison complex, and the rebels’ sources had sounded so certain. Maybe they’d gotten mixed up; as one of the two senators sentenced with Stazi for their supposed role in Marasiah’s supposed murder, Nelloran was still a most valuable prisoner.

Maybe Stazi was in another cell, but if so, Ganner had no idea which, and they didn’t have the time to cut through every door and release every prisoner. Most likely the admiral was being kept in another facility entirely, half a galaxy away, but they didn’t *know*, and it caused the entire team to freeze with indecision.

Nelloran rose to his feet. “Well? Are we escaping or what?”

Kyra’s battle-poise was gone; she was out of her element. Ganner stepped around her and waved Nelloran forward.

“We’ve come a long way for you, Senator. Now it’s just a little further to freedom. Come with us and we’ll get you out of here.”

When he finished his meal, Stazi placed his tray on the floor at the base of the door, as he always did. Sometime soon, a droid or possibly a human might come by and remove it through the bottom slot. For a while, Stazi had made mental wagers with himself whether a metal or flesh-and-blood hand would take it away, but that had been months ago. Maybe over a year.

This time he sat on his bunk and watched, not expecting anything. When he heard feet approaching he didn’t flinch, though he did strain his hearing. Normally he could easily tell droid footsteps from those of a living being; right now he seemed to be hearing both at once, as though they marched in perfect lock-step.

He got his real surprise when the door opened. Instead of the bottom panel peeling away, the entire thing slid to the side and disappeared into the thick doorframe. Stazi stared in shock at the figures on the other side: two skeletal guard droids and one Elomin, surprisingly thickset for his usually rail-thin species. The Elomin was dressed in a blue uniform of the Galactic Federation Correctional Authority; like too many Federation departments, it was predominantly staffed with former Imperials.

The Elomin smiled pleasantly and folded his hands over his bulging stomach. “Good afternoon, Admiral. Did you enjoy your meal?”

Those were the first words he’d heard spoken from a live mouth in months. Stazi’s voice, barely used all that time, creaked as he said, “It was sufficient.”

“I’m so glad.” The Elomin snapped his fingers and stepped away from the door. One skeletal droid squatted low and picked up the food tray. The other kept its wrist-mounted blasters pointed at the prisoner.

Stazi decided to take the lead in the conversation. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“Your presence has been requested. And from high places, no less.”



Curiously he asked, "Chalk?"

"Oh, no, the regent is quite occupied on Coruscant."

He paused, baiting Stazi to ask where he was being kept now. The Duro didn't take it. Instead he stood up and straightened his orange jumpsuit to look halfway dignified. "If you're going to take me to my host, go ahead."

"I'm glad to see you're compliant," the Elomin smiled.

He stepped back and waved for Stazi to walk through the door. The Duros did so cautiously, partly to hide the tremble of his underused legs but also to peek into the hallway before stepping inside. To his slight surprise, there was only the two droids and the Elomin, who snapped his fingers again and set the droids to marching.

The one with the tray took the lead and the one with the levelled blasters settled in behind Stazi. It marched, and so did he. He tried to keep his strides short and steady, lest his muscles cramp. The Elomin walked at the very rear, faint smile lingering on his plump face.

Stazi wanted to smack that smile away, but he was also grateful to be allowed to see anything. Every past time they'd taken him from his cell they'd wrapped a black bandana around his eyes, concealing any hint of where he might be. This time it was different. After two corners they passed through armored doors, and at the end of the new hall Stazi saw daylight gleaming through transparent doors. The droids marched him forward and the doors slid apart, and for the first time in months, maybe years, the Duros breathed fresh air and felt wind on his face.

It was less pleasant than he remembered. The area outside his sealed, air-conditioned bunker was thick and rank. When his eyes adjust to natural light Stazi scanned the scene around him: a handful of prefabricated, boxy gray buildings were placed in a brown muddy field, and the field was walled in by four-meter-high duracrete barricades topped by barbed electric wire and periodically joined to elevated guard towers. Beyond the barricades he saw the green treeline of a looming jungle. The cloud-mottled sky overhead had a curiously violet tint. He smelled rain on the air and had a feeling this place saw a lot of it.

What specific world he was on, Stazi had no idea. Faintly

disappointed, he let his captors lead him over a metal-plank walkway laid over the muddy yard. It passed from his bunker to a smaller one, tucked against the base of a tall central guard-tower. There was, Stazi noticed, a lack of guards in the yard itself. Possibly they were trying to keep his presence secret, even from most of the prison staff.

The droid with his meal tray stepped aside, but his other two captors led him into the smaller bunker, past an unmanned security gate, down a hall, and finally into an office. The broad window sat behind a broad desk and looked out on the mudfield and the jungle sprawling beyond. The man seated at the desk, a dark-skinned human with gray peppering his close-cropped black hair, was quite thin, with an angular face and slanting eyebrows that gave him a fierce look.

"That you, Captain," the man said as he leaned back in his plush chair to regard the prisoner. "That will be all for now."

"Very good, sir." The Elomin saluted and stepped outside. The droid remained behind Stazi, blaster pointed at his back.

"Please, have a seat." The man gestured to a more modest chair in front of his desk.

"I'd rather stand." Stazi drew himself straight and clasped hands behind his back, like an officer. "I spend enough time sitting in my cell."

"All right, then, you can sit or stand, it hardly matters," the man said, like it didn't matter to him either way. By choosing not to fight he was denying Stazi the chance at victory.

"Are you the warden of this place?"

"I am. My name is Olak Zegorian. Would you like to know where you are?"

"Would you tell me?"

The man's smile was tight, smug. "I might. But I doubt you'd recognize the name. This planet is hardly prime real estate."

Stazi decided to let this fight pass too. "Is there a reason I was brought here, after all this time?"

"There is, actually." Zegorian leaned forward and tapped a control panel on his polished-wood desk. A holo-image sprung to life. It depicted four irregularly-shaped objects, apparently asteroids or planetoids. They seemed joined together by thin tubes and held in place to create a loose diamond formation.

Something in that stirred Stazi's memory, but he couldn't

place it. Zegorian said, "Praxal VII. The Federation's most secure correctional facility."

"That's not here," Stazi said plainly.

"No, but your friends *think* you're located there. Regent Chalk, in fact, personally supervised the laying of a very precise, careful trail of evidence that led some of your compatriots into our trap."

It was Stazi's first verification that he *had* compatriots left. Still, he was hardly cheered. Zegorian went on, "Currently, one of the main cell blocks at Praxal VII is suffering from an inmate riot. They report an inexplicable malfunction that opened all the cell doors at once. Minutes later, two zero-g transit tubes connecting one of the asteroids to its partners suffered simultaneous explosions aboard two separate cargo containers." The warden leaned forward. "Your compatriots are capable and ruthless. You should be proud."

"Maybe they'll break through your trap."

"Maybe they will, but I've been assured Praxal VII is quite prepared for anything. And even if some of the intruders do escape, there's not a chance they'll get the bounty they came for." Zegorian smiled politely and gestured to the chair in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat. Whatever happens, I look forward to watching it together."

It was a cruel taunt, and Stazi had half a mind to walk out of this office right now. Let the droid pump a stun blast into him; he'd taken those before. But maybe his would-be rescuers really would find a way to escape; they'd clearly been capable this far. Maybe he'd even get cause to give Zegorian a fierce, taunting smile of his own.

It was a faint hope, but it was still a hope. Stazi sat down in the chair and waited.

Something was severely, deeply wrong. Kyra knew that. She was dead certain. Whether the Force was telling her or her own gut, she wasn't sure; Ganner, Asaak, and Jao had all admitted they'd had a hard time telling between the two. No matter what, she was certain this wasn't just an intelligence mix-up, Nelloran mistaken for Stazi. This was a trap.

As soon as they took the senator out of his cell they got moving. Ganner had apparently memorized the entrails of

Asteroid Cresh and he guided the group of seven to the access tube that led to the airlock. As soon as she got her wits about her Kyra triggered the beacon in her pocket and sent the second signal, the one that would call in the evacuation team. On their way to the airlock they met up with Ahlegarr, the Shistavenen who'd sabotaged Cresh's shield.

As they drew closer to the airlock Kyra felt surging confidence from the others. After finding Nelloran instead of Stazi they'd all been struck by confusion and disappointment, but that was dwindling now, replaced by joy and relief as the escape from this harrowing mission came in sight. She even felt it from Yana Oris, that confused woman Ganner had heroically dragged along for the ride.

But something was going to go wrong. Kyra knew it, and when the first laser-blasts sounded behind them she actually felt relief.

Rolvis and Taige were the ones bringing up the rear, and they immediately spun to return fire. Ganner shoved Oris up ahead, by Kyra and Ahlegarr, and joined them. Kyra counted four guards shooting at them from the corner at the far end of the hall. The bolts were stun-blue, but that gave no comfort; before this mission started they'd all agreed no one was to be left behind. Better be shot dead by your own than taken prison by Chalk.

"Fall back!" Ahlegarr roared over the sound of laserfire. "We're almost there!"

He grabbed Oris by the arm and dragged her forward. Taige, Rolvis, and Ganner tried to stage a fighting retreat but the enemy guards began a brave charge down the long, straight corridor. Shooting kill blasts, Taige took one soldier in the chest, but received a stun shot in return. He grunted and fell face-down; Kyra's heart froze when she saw it but Asaak grabbed her arm and pulled her ahead.

Ganner and Rolvis fell back. Kyra could feel anguish twist the heart of the former Imperial Knight and when she looked back one more time, just before Asaak tugged her around a corner, she saw Ganner heft his rifle and fire a spray of burning red blasts into Taige's prone body.

Once they cleared the turn, he and Rolvis stayed at the corner, using the edge for cover as they shot back at the

advancing guards. Angry at himself for what he'd done and angry at the necessity of it, Ganner snarled, "Keep going! We'll hold them back!"

Kyra wasn't leaving two more to die. She shook off Asaak's grip and told him, "Go ahead! We'll be right behind you!"

The Togruta was skeptical, but he nodded and started after Oris, Nelloran, and Ahlegarr. He didn't get far. The corridor ahead ended in a sealed door, and before she joined Ganner, Kyra glanced back to see the Shistavenen bent over the control panel, fur bristling in frustration. They were locked out, and the only quick way through was with a lightsaber.

Swearing she'd be right back to help Ganner and Rolvis, Kyra sprinted to the end of the hall and ignited her lightsaber. She was just two meters away from the door when it swung open. The Force hit her like a staggering blow but Ahlegarr, unaffected and closer to the threshold, immediately raised his blaster and fired into hall beyond. Kyra couldn't warn him in time; she could only watch as a pure-white blaze burst to life among the shadowed soldiers on the other side. It caught Ahlegarr's blast perfectly and reflected it back; the bolt hit the Shistavenen in the face, burned off the left side of his head, and dropped him dead to the ground.

Oris cowered back from Ahlegarr's corpse; Nelloran froze. Kyra found her senses and the Force; she grabbed the two civilians and hurled them away from the door, leaving nothing but two meters and a corpse between Kyra and the approaching enemy. This was what she'd feared, what she'd known was coming. It was the final proof that this whole operation had been a trap, not just for the rebels, but for her.

As they reached the door she counted her enemy. Five were stormtroopers in white armor, faceless, so different from the blue-clad guards who patrolled the prison. The last figure belonged to a young man barely older than her, dressed in a jet-black version of an Imperial Knight's scarlet armor. Just like her, he hefted a lightsaber in two hands, all-white blade tilted forward, feet staggered and ready for combat. It wouldn't be their first time clashing sabers. Almost three years back, that white blade had left a scar slashed across Kyra's left cheek. Their next fight had gone better, but ended in a draw. He was more experienced than her and just as determined; despite all

the hard learning she'd done Kyra didn't know if she could win the fight ahead, only that she had to try.

As his white blade lit an expression of grim resolve, Eli Horn stepped forward to meet her.

## Chapter Six

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The sun went down slowly over the savanna, like it always did. Thin cloud-drifts were painted vivid red as the sky behind them burned gold. Long grass swayed slowly in the breeze and covered expansive miles of low rolling hills, the monotony broken only by the occasional copse of clustered trees, now dyed violet by evening shadow.

It was a peaceful scene, one repeated on this patch of land for uncounted thousands of years. Maridun was a planet that existed happily outside the drama of galactic history. From time to time empires would come to disturb the semi-nomadic tribes of native Amanin, but they'd always leave, and the Amanin would go back to living as migrant hunter-gatherers like they had for thousands of years.

There was one point of tension in the calm, expansive landscape. Atop one low hill, gathered around a single thick-trunk tree with spread-out branches, were two groups of Amanin. A half-dozen stood in each group, facing each other from either side of the tree. Each tall flat body rode nearly three meters high. Face melded into torso and Amanin lacked arms and necks, but two thin legs planted them to the ground and they grasped primitive spears with equally thin arms.

One didn't need Force skills or familiarity with Amanin culture to know these two groups were at odds. It was especially clear to the single blue-skinned Twi'lek sitting at the base of the tree. He'd spent the past afternoon listening to the two parties list their complaints and glare threats at one another. Finally, as the day died down, they'd each said their pieces and awaited the passing of judgment.

Shado Vao considered carefully. This was hardly the first case different tribes of Amanin had brought to him for arbitration. He'd met several individuals from both sides before. When he'd first come to Maridun he'd not planned on getting involved in local affairs. Indeed, he'd picked this planet for its isolation and primitive culture. It had seemed a good place to hide from a galaxy he could no longer operate in.

But that never lasted. He'd fashioned his hermitage on the edge of the savannah, where grassland swept upward onto dryer plateau, and for the first few months the Amanin had left him alone. Then, while ranging down onto the plain, he'd encountered a single Amanin infant curled up into a ball, trembling in pain as it bled from claw-marks left by one of Maridun's native predators. Shado had been distraught, and he'd gathered the child in his arms and searched for the parent.

That had been a hot, exhausting day; even young Amanin were quite heavy. Eventually he'd found the tribe to which the child belonged. The natives had been glad to have their child back but regarded him warily. Shado had assured him they had nothing to fear, using halting sentences of their own language he'd taught himself in preparation for coming here.

The Amanin had grown calmer once they realized this blue-skinned humanoid had come to live among them in peace, not conquer or enslave them. A few weeks later, a separate tribe had approached Shado's redoubt to scout the strange foreigner. Again, they'd relaxed once they found he spoke some of their language, and for a time Shado welcomed guests to his place to practice the local tongue. In that time he'd learned much about the culture and even politics of the different Amanin tribes. In turn he'd told the curious among them about life out on distant stars, though he'd enjoyed that part less.

Eventually the day had come when two separate tribes, both of which had paid his hermitage regular visits, came to Shado asking him to act as a neutral party and settle a dispute over hunting grounds. Shado, a little reluctantly, had done his best to split the land between the two groups using a seasonal stream as dividing line. To his surprise the settlement worked; the two feuding Amanin tribes found peace.

He'd felt good after that, like a Jedi was supposed to after helping solve others' problems. In retrospect it had been the



turning points when casual visits decreased and were replaced by different Amanin factions coming to him and asking him to settle some dispute or another. The locals looked on him now less as a friend or even welcome guest; he'd become an arbiter of justice without even trying.

The case before him today had blood on the scales. A youth from the tribe on his left had been killed in a skirmish with youth from the tribe on his right. Amanin took blood feuds seriously, and Shado was just trying to prevent a war.

After listening to their pleas and considering carefully, Shado looked to the tribe on his right. "Your people have committed a definite transgression. The Slow River tribe has every right to command justice."

"We understand that," said the leader of the Whisper Grass tribe. "We have said we will pay with ten carcasses of fresh meat and cleave down ten trees for them to build with."

"That will never be enough to replace our dead," snapped the Slow River leader.

"Our payment is more than generous," insisted the other chieftain.

"No. Blood must be paid for in blood, as it always has been!"

"Your customs are old and unbreakable," Shado told them. "I've made a decision that respects this."

"And what is your decision?" The Whisper Grass leader was suspicious.

Shado held out a hand. "You are to select a youth from your tribe. Not the one who killed their youth, but one about the same age. The one you select will join the Slow River tribe. They'll raise him as their own. Two months out of every year, that you will return to the Whisper Grass and travel the plains with them."

Both tribes were clearly stunned by the proposal. The Slow River chief muttered, "This is... most unusual."

"You'll be getting a new member to replace the one that was stolen from you," said Shado sternly. "And you *will* raise him as your own, lest you dishonor the legacy of the one who was killed." He swung eyes back to the Whisper Grass leader. "And when he comes back to you for two months of every year, you will treat him as part of *your* clan."

The Whisper Grass chief growled, "You ask us to split one of our own in pieces."

"I know. It will be hard for him, but he will *live*." He looked back to the Slow River side. "You're getting blood for blood, just like you wanted. It's just not being spilled." Both sides hesitated. Shado added, "You agreed to abide by my justice when you came to me. That was clear at the outset. Wasn't it?"

"It was," the Whisper Grass chief admitted.

"Then abide. Both of you. Tomorrow afternoon I want you both to return here. Whisper Grass will present its youth. Slow River will perform formal initiation rites and swear to protect that youth as its own. Do you understand? Yes or no."

He was leaving no room for argument; Shado had learned early on that an arbiter had to be firm. Slow River was the first to say, "We understand." A moment later Whisper Grass joined, "We will abide by your judgment."

"Come here tomorrow and prove that," Shado told them, then raised a hand. "I've made my judgement. You can go now."

Grudging but accepting, the two clans of Amanin stepped away. Once they'd descended opposite sides of the hill, both groups coiled their tall flat bodies into fleshy wheels, pressed spindly arms against their flanks, and began rolling swiftly in opposite directions.

The past afternoon had left Shado weary, but he still smiled as he watched the two departing tribes, each kicking up a trail of dust that caught dying sunlight and glowed like a pillar of fire. After all this time, he was still impressed by how swift the plodding, plantlike Amanin could be.

Shado rose to his feet and began moving across the plain at a slower pace, using his wooden walking stick like a third leg. His loose robe, tattered remains of his old Jedi clothes, flicked around him in the wind. Ahead of him, a full kilometer away, rose the plateau escarpment, with his simple mudbrick home a quarter-way up the slope.

It was a slow, thoughtful walk. Gold light faded to violet and stars began to peek through the twilight sky. Shado knew Whisper Grass and Slow River would be back tomorrow to make the exchange. What happened then, he didn't know. Perhaps the youth would be torn apart by differing allegiances. Perhaps, as Shado hoped, he'd become a bridge to bind the

tribes together. Shado would wait and see, and maybe, many years from now, he'd be able to decide whether he'd done right or wrong.

As he started up the slope Shado heard a half-familiar whine breaking the fresh night air. He looked up to see the bright lights of starship thrusters burning as they circled over his head. He sighed; deep down he'd known an encounter like this was coming and dreaded it. His isolation on Maridun hadn't always been happy, but it was still isolation, and that was preferable than submerging himself in the tide of history again.

Shado stopped in place and waited as the starship cut engines and lowered itself on repulsors. The old Incom X-83 Twintail, once the favorite of Jedi snubfighter pilots, set down on a stretch of flat, dry earth some thirty meters away. Once it was firmly planted on its landing gear, Shado began to walk toward it. In the dim light it was hard to make out details on the figure who emerged from the opened cockpit. The small, thin frame suggested a woman, but there was something bulky and angular in the chest. It wasn't until the figure dropped to the ground, wrenched off its flight helmet, and stepped closer that Shado was able to make out who it was.

"You're a hard man to find, Shado Vao," said Azlyn Rae as she tucked the helmet underarm and ran a hand through her short red hair.

"That was the intention," he said blankly. "But it looks like you managed anyway."

"I had to do some asking around."

"Quietly, I hope." Shado had only told one person before seeking isolation on Maridun: his sister Astraal, who was still working for Hogram Chalk, keeping an eye on the regent as surely as he kept an eye on her.

"I'm discreet, Shado. Don't worry." Azlyn raised her head and squinted at the cliffside. "Is that your home?"

"It's simple, but it's all I need."

"I don't suppose it has room for a guest."

"As long as they're not permanent."

She smiled tolerantly. "All I ask is a night."

"A night," Shado said, "is fine."

For a place he'd built himself, Shado's home looked clean

and well-made, at least in the dark. He carried a burning oil lamp inside, not an electric glowlight, and showed Azlyn the central room where she could sleep. The floor was just cool mudbrick, but he'd placed a thatched rug over the center. She dropped her bedroll off her shoulder and placed it there but didn't unpack.

"I don't suppose you have local delicacies," she told Shado.

The flicking lamp cut harsh, unsteady shadows across his face as he watched her. Rough living had thinned him out; he probably weighed less now than he had fifteen years ago, when they'd been apprentices at the Jedi academy on Ossus. Several lifetimes ago.

After staring at her for a moment, Shado turned and retrieved a bowl of orange, ovoid fruits. "The taste is a little sour," he said, "But they're nutritious."

"Juicy?" Spending too much time in the Crossfire always got her parched.

"But sour," Shado said.

"I'll try it." Azlyn took one fruit out of the bowl and bit into it. Sour but not too sour, and definitely moist. She swallowed her first mouthful and happily took another.

Shado kept staring at her. When she'd eaten half the thing he asked, "Azlyn, what are you *doing* here?"

She lowered the fruit and smiled softly. "You're really not happy to see me, are you?"

"I'm not... unhappy. I'm just surprised."

"It is wrong that I wanted to see how you were doing?"

"No." He paused. "Is anything the matter?"

"I didn't come to bear any bad news, no. Not any worse news than normal, anyway." She looked around the lamplit room, its simple wooden shelves and pale walls. He really had gone primitive. Azlyn needed machinery to live, specifically to breathe for her, but she admired his commitment to simplicity. "What happened to the ship you got here on?"

"I left it on top of the plateau. Draped a camo net over it."

That pleased her. "I was afraid you'd tell me you'd crashed it on purpose or burned it to a husk."

"No. I still use the comm system to talk to Astraal.... sometimes."

"So you haven't completely given up on civilization."

“Civilization can do whatever it wants. I wasn’t going to sever myself from my sister completely.”

“Just mostly,” Azlyn said. When he scowled she added, “I’m not judging. Really, I’m not. I understand how you didn’t feel a part of the Jedi anymore.”

“There *are* no Jedi. Just like there’s no Sith, no Imperial Knights...”

“There’s still a few,” Azlyn whispered.

Khat Lah and his Yuuzhan Vong. The Kwa monks on Rohakalla. That girl Kyra and her counterpart, Eli. But as her eyes met Shado’s she knew they were both thinking of the same man.

“Any idea where Cade is now?” he asked.

“None. He still has *Mynock* and he wanders, just like always. I haven’t seen him in... over a year.”

“Are you still with the- with Master Tuum?” He’d almost said *Jedi*.

“We’re still looking. I’d done a lot of travelling as an Imperial Knight, so I’ve been doing trips by myself to scope out planets.”

“You’re looking for those... Tho Yor?”

“Yes. And anything else that might lead us to a planet like the one Cade went to.”

“Any success?”

Azlyn shook her head.

Shado sighed. “And have you ever thought about... giving it up?”

“You mean settling down on a nothing planet like this?”

“Or someplace else. It doesn’t have to be this... isolated.”

“There’s still a chance we- or somebody else- might find something. Cade’s still searching too, I think, and Khat Lah and his band.”

Shado stared into the darkness past her shoulder. Softly he asked, “Do you *want* the Force to come back? Do you want to be a Jedi- or an Imperial Knight- again?”

Naturally, she’d had plenty of time to think that over. Yet she found she couldn’t answer the same as she did to Masters Tuum or K’Kruhk. Shado had been her friend, not her teacher, since as far back as she could remember. It compelled a specific kind of honesty.

"I want to feel the Force," she said. "What I call myself when I get it doesn't really matter. But more than that, it's important to have the goal I'm working toward."

"Even when you know you'll never find it?"

She smirked. "I'm not that pessimistic."

"No, you're not." He said it with faint surprise.

"Tell me, Shado... Do *you* want the Force back?"

He scowled and looked away again. "I don't think I ever really knew the Force. I used it for my own ends, but I don't think I touched it, or felt its will. I just thought I did and used it to justify whatever I wanted to do."

"That sounds like something a Sith does. You were never anything close to that, Shado. You were—"

"Don't tell me I was the upright, model Jedi. Please." His voice cracked. "I was... idealistic. I wanted to solve every problem, right every wrong. I thought the Force gave me license to do that."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to make things better."

He snorted. "I'm not sure I can tell the difference between idealism and vanity anymore."

Azlyn stared his profile, wondering how much he'd allow her to pry. "Shado, do you *do* anything out here?"

He snorted again. "The same thing I did out there, actually. I just can't help myself. I'm like an addict, trying to right everybody's wrongs."

She was shocked by the self-loathing in his voice. "I don't understand."

"The natives here, the Amanin. They come to me and I solve their problems. Just today I had two tribes. One tribe killed a youth from another tribe. That second tribe wanted revenge. Blood for blood." He shrugged. "I made that second tribe adopt a member from the first tribe, and they'd have to send the kid back to his original people a few times a year. I said that's still blood for blood, just not *spilled* blood. I was trying to build a bridge..."

"That sounds wise." It sounded very Jedi-like, but she knew not to say it.

Shado scowled. "Maybe it will work. Maybe they'll fight over that kid and have a war, bigger than the one I was trying to stop. I don't know. I can't know. I just... do what I think is

best. Not the will of the Force, my will.” He jabbed a thumb at his chest. “The good thing is that down here when I try to fix thing it’s so small scale... I won’t burn any planets if I mess up.”

Azlyn knew bad things had happened to Shado on Bakura, but not the full of it. If she prodded for more he’d block her, so instead she asked, “Do you plan to stay here forever?”

“Nobody stays anywhere forever.”

“You know what I mean. What does Astraal think about your... seclusion?”

“She tried to talk me out of it. But she knew she wouldn’t win. She said I was always the stubborn one... which I think is true.” He stared into shadows again. “Will you keep chasing the Force forever?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe.”

“Then we’re both fools,” he said, resigned.

“Maybe,” she repeated, and looked down at the half-eaten fruit in her hand. “But maybe we can do some good, too.”

Shado glanced at her, and she could tell he was weighing responses, some of them cruel. But in the end he said, “I have more food if you’re interested.”

That was the signal to end the conversation. “I’ll try anything once,” Azlyn said.

As he turned his lamp toward his food shelf, Shado said, “I don’t remember you being... adventurous back at the academy.”

“People change.”

Shado froze in the dark. Then he muttered, “Yes, they do,” and reached for another bowl.

## Chapter Seven

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When her Crossfire dropped out of hyperspace, Anj Dahl gripped the fighter's control stick, ready for any danger. This far out in the Praxal System, the four asteroids that made up the prison complex were hard to spot, and she relied on her sensors to direct her toward the black spots drifting against stars.

She checked her sensors, too, and made certain the rest of her party was behind her. Eleven Crossfires filled out Rogue Squadron and a boxy, heavily-armored shuttle brought up the rear. So far so good, Anj thought. Now it was about to get messy.

"All ships, this is Rogue Leader. One and Two Flights, we're going in. Flight Three, hang back and protect the shuttle. All ships, shields up and weapons hot."

She added more power to thrusters and pushed ahead. As the eight Crossfires drew closer, the black shapes of the asteroid prison grew more distinct. There were hardly any exterior running lights, but the four irregular black shaped eclipsed large pieces of the starfield. She checked her scanners; it looked like shields had been raised around three of the asteroids but not the fourth. As promised, that one had been taken offline.

So far so good, but Anj found one thing she didn't like. On her headset, a voice said, "Lead, this is Five. Can you see the beacon?"

"Negative, Five," she admitted. That was the bad sign she'd been waiting for; it meant the rescue team was stuck inside the asteroid and hadn't reached the airlock portal yet. They might not even have Stazi with them.



Her pilots needed direction, and she found one quickly. "I'm spotting four turbolaser turrets on the other asteroids. Let's clear 'em off so the shuttle can land safely. Rogues, get your torps ready to bust through their shields."

Her pilots clicked affirmative. They followed her lead, swinging close over the rough surface of the unshielded asteroid before cutting on the shielded ones. Clinging dangerously near the rock, they were hard for the turbolasers to track, and Anj led her flight in swooping down on the nearest battery. The four Crossfires slipped from one side to another, evading emerald tracking fire, until their targeting computers could get a fix. When all three of her pilots reported locks on the tower, she ordered them to fire and break formation.

The four fighters peeled in opposite directions; two jumped out into space while Anj and Rouge Three dove low, staying just above the invisible shield-dome that encased the asteroid. Once she curved out of range of the turbolasers she glanced at her scanners: shields broken, tower damaged, but not entirely out of commission.

She grimaced and said, "One Flight, on me. We'll go around for another pass!"

Before her group could reform, Rogue Five's voice rang clear on her headset. "Look alive! We've got incoming, point oh-seven!"

Anj looked at her scanners to see a new starship had joined the fray: one light frigate, Imperial model. It was positioned on the opposite side of the asteroid formation as the shuttle, but sensors showed it was spewing TIE Predators into space.

"Damn," she snarled, "One Flight, Two Flight, on me. We're going after the TIEs. Three flight, withdraw to the edge of the battle zone and protect that shuttle!"

Anj pushed her fighter away from the asteroids and was relieved to see that all seven Rogues were falling in behind her. As she adjusted vector toward the frigate she scanned the starfield with her eyes and just barely made out the glow of its thrusters. The enemy was far away now but would be on them fast. She shunted shields forward to take the initial barrage and prepared a torpedo to fire.

Then came another surprise, the worst of all. She felt a slight lurch in her gut, despite flying a steady line. She checked her

sensor board and saw that, impossibly, the battle zone had been enveloped in an artificial gravity well. They were now unable to escape to hyperspace.

But no, it wasn't possible. She checked her scanners again; that frigate was too small to host gravity well projectors and the center of the well seemed to be located far away from the ship.

It had to be a Hapan pulse-mass generator, the same kind they'd used to trap and slaughter Jhoram Bey's fleet. Anj and the Rouges had just barely been able to punch a hole in the interdiction field then; she didn't know if they could be so lucky again, now that they'd clearly dived right into a trap.

Her comm board was lighting up but Anj ignored all the hails and declared in a broad frequency, "Check that, Rogues. Take them on the first pass, torps only, then break and run. Nobody's getting out of here until we find and destroy that Hapan mine."

Those TIEs were coming fast now. With her bare eyes, Anj could see them spit out the first volleys of green laser-bolts.

"Break and fire my mark!" she called and let her targeting computer got a lock on a charging TIE. "One, two, three, mark!"

Anj fired off one torpedo, wrenched her ship away, fired engines to full, and ran like hell was chasing her.

The Crossfires were good. As soon as they released their first torpedoes the eight rebel snubfighters broke formation, scattering at random and forcing the twelve TIE Predators to evade their warheads before giving pursuit. One TIE didn't even get that far; the proton explosion broke through shields, tore apart its left solar panel, and sent it spiraling into black space. The first rebel barrage was over in a second, and by the time the TIEs recovered they were left to seek out dancing, distant thrust-trails. As she picked the nearest target and gave chase, Gunner Yage wondered if she was, in fact, facing the legendary Rogue Squadron.

It would make certain sense. Her Skull Squadron was, in all modesty, the most deadly in the Federation, and the rebels would have sent their best pilots too. When she'd been assigned to this duty- coasting bored on a frigate skirting the Outer Rim near the Praxal system- it had sounded like a dead-end job, a punishment for some infraction she hadn't recalled making.

Only now did she realize that Praxal VII was a carefully baited trap, and Skull Squadron was here to ensure it succeeded. Clearly, somebody thought well of their skill; maybe her father, maybe Regent Chalk himself.

So, flattered after all, Gunner set herself to the task. Crossfires were quick ships but TIE Predators were quicker. The ship she was pursuing didn't do much to evade until she got close to firing range, which itself took a few frustrating minutes. The rebels were clearly trying to ferret out the Hapan pulse mass generator mine that was keeping them trapped at Praxal VII, but the mine was well-protected from their sensors by its jamming field. The rebels would either have to spot it with bare eyes or fly into the heart of the jamming to spot it.

That could take hours in ideal circumstances, and things clearly weren't ideal for the rebels. As she drew close to the Crossfire, which by now was bobbing and weaving with the best of them, Gunner checked her scanners and saw that another TIE Predator was coming up behind her.

"Need help, Leader?" called Tev Rimmon. Of course he'd be the one chasing her.

"Stay behind me," she called. "Catch it if it gets past me."

"Copy, Lead."

Rimmon kept his distance as she closed in on the Crossfire. He hung clear, always trying to keep the rebel fighter in his sights in case he needed to take a shot. When Gunner got in range she pummeled the Crossfire's aft with green laserfire, but the ship's shields held. To her surprise the ship dropped speed, so much she nearly overtook and collided with it. She veered hard port to avoid an impact and the Crossfire was suddenly behind her. Red lasers flashed outside her cockpit as she struggled to evade.

"Dammit, Tev, where are you?"

As if on cue he came in from the side, piercing the Crossfire's shields where it was weak. Laser blasts tore apart the hull and sparked a fireball; Tev didn't bother to avoid it and flew through the blast and out the other side, triumphant.

"Stop showboating!" Gunner warned. "You could have been burned!"

"Worried about me, Lead? I'm touched, but can I get a 'thank you'?"

"Thank you," she growled. "Now call in the rest of your flight and fall in with me."

As he settled behind her Rimmon asked, "Where are we going?"

She glanced at her scanners. "They've got an extraction shuttle on the far end of the battle zone. Four Crossfires guarding. Take out the shuttle and this mission is over."

"Understood," Rimmon said, suddenly seriously. "Calling the boys in now."

Gunner took them high above Praxal VII's conjoined asteroids for an approach on the shuttle. It would see them coming, and try to evade, but it could never outrun the TIEs. The real threat was the Crossfires.

Once again, Gunner wondered if it was Rogue Squadron she was facing. She wondered if she'd met the pilot Rimmon had just killed, back when the two units were flying ops together during the last battle against Krayt and everyone, Alliance and Imperial, had all felt like comrades in arms.

They'd gone from enemies to friends to enemies again. By now she should be used to the crazy twists history could take. Gunner only had to think back to that day three years ago when another squad of Alliance radicals had rained hellfire on Galactic City, and all her doubts dissolved. As the rest of Rimmon's flight formed up behind her she increased speed and pushed eagerly toward the target.

They fell on each other in a flurry of white. Eli and Kyra suddenly filled the hall, slashing and thrusting, blocking and parrying as only Force-users could. For a second Ganner was so captivated that he forgot the five stormtroopers who'd emerged behind Eli. Apparently the troopers were captivated too; that or they didn't dare fire or advance on the duelists.

Ganner recovered his wits first. Still on the far end of the hall, where he and Rolvis were fighting back a rear advance of prison guards, he dropped to his stomach and fired from the floor. His blast cut in beneath the whirring white blades and took one stormtrooper in the thigh, blasting through white armor and dropping him. Asaak Dan, who'd rushed over beside Senator Nelloran and Yana Oris, dropped low and tried another shot, but now two more stormtroopers had dropped to their

knees and were trying to shoot beneath the lightsabers. One trooper was unlucky; his stun shot was repelled back in his face and he crumpled to the floor. The other was better; his blast ricocheted off the wall and nearly winged Asaak.

The commencement of fire around them tore Eli and Kyra from their duel. The young woman took a Force-elongated jump back, away from Eli's reach, then pushed out an invisible wall. Eli threw up a hand to block it, but only for himself; two stormtroopers staggered and another was knocked off his feet.

Kyra charged again. This time she forced Eli to backstep, which in turn forced him to stumble against the prone white bodies of the stormtroopers. Kyra thrust; Eli twisted and barely dodged. As his body slammed shoulder-first into one wall Kyra pounced on him, pinning him against the gray bulkhead as their sabers sizzled together.

To Ganner and Asaak she cried, "Go!"

They went. Asaak grabbed Nelloran by the arm, pulled the senator to his feet, and threw him toward the door. Ganner ran, scooped up Oris, and called for Rolvis to follow. The rebel holding rear guard turned, sprinted, and barely made it two meters before a shot took him from behind. Blue energy speared his back and dropped him, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Ganner knew what he had to do. He'd already done it once with Taige. None of them could be taken prisoner. That didn't make it easy.

As the guards came up on Rolvis from behind, he did what he'd done before. He sprayed lethal laser-blasts low and peppered them across his comrade's fallen body, trying not to watch as they tore scorched holes in his still-breathing flesh. Mercifully, he couldn't afford to stay and look at what he'd done. Ashamed and sick in the heart, Ganner turned and ran, pulling Oris with him over the prone stormtroopers and through the doorway, into the hallway beyond.

Behind him, Eli broke free of Kyra and they resumed the fight that filled the corridor.

Ganner couldn't look back at that either. He and Oris followed Asaak and Nelloran as they rounded a corner, turned at an intersection, and raced toward the airlock that could take them out of here. As they ran Ganner released Oris and used that

hand to thumb the beacon transmitter Kyra had given him back at the cells. If their allies were out there- and they'd damned well better be- they'd be able to trace his exact location now.

He prayed they were ready, because he sure as all hells was.

They turned one more corner and suddenly were taking fire. Ganner raised his blaster and got off a shot, knocking down the stormtrooper dead in front of him. Asaak took out the other, but not before a stun blast took Nelloran head-on. The senator staggered, sagged, and collapsed against the wall, but Oris rushed forward to try and hold him up. The Nosaurian was heavy, and all she could do was lower him to the floor.

It was then that Ganner noticed a fourth body, one that had been lying at the stormtroopers' feet during as they'd turned the corner. The green-skinned Ishi Tib was undoubtedly Cev'mor, the last member of their rebel band, the one who'd been tasked with securing the passageway to the airlock. He was still breathing, slowly.

Asaak lurched for the door the troopers had been guarding. He slapped the control panel and the door slid away, revealing a hallway that was long, narrow, and cramped. Lights were dim and the hall ran all the way into darkness.

"Tell me that's the way out of here," Ganner said as he bent over Cev'mor and hooked an arm beneath either shoulder.

"It is," said Asaak, and he kicked the prone troopers out of the way so Ganner could start dragging Cev'mor into the tunnel. Oris bent over, took his boots, and helped move him inside. At the same time Asaak holstered his pistol, moved over to Nelloran, and began moving the senator. Ganner had no idea how they could get two stunned bodies down that long tunnel; they could use Kyra's Force-powers now more than ever. Once Cev'mor was fully inside, Ganner took out his blaster and started back down the hall. He didn't know how he could help her, not against Eli, but he could try.

He only got a few steps before a group of guards, probably the ones who'd shot Rolvis, came swinging around the corner. Asaak swore; Ganner ducked back. He reached out and grabbed the Togruta with his free arm, pulling him roughly into the tunnel mouth. It was only when they'd both gone through that Ganner realized Nelloran was on the other side.

There was no time to go back for him. The guards were on

him, reclaiming their prisoner. Before they could fire down the tunnel, Asaak slammed the controls and closed the hatch from the inside, then fried them with his blaster. It would hold them for a little while, but not for long.

“Come on,” the Togruta snarled, “Let’s get to the airlock and pray there’s someone on the other side.”

He bent low to take Cev’mor’s limp body by the shoulders. Ganner took his feet and Oris awkwardly handled his midsection. Together they stared up the tunnel, deeper into darkness, leaving Nelloran to his old captors and Kyra to Eli Horn.

After everything he’d gone through the past four years, Ganner was almost used to this kind of helplessness. He was just thankful he hadn’t had to shoot the senator, too.

As he and Kyra clashed, Eli couldn’t help but think how much stronger she’d gotten since they’d first met. The hallway in which they battled was narrow, and by now the walls were laced with black scorch slash-marks left from either lightsaber. She could block his attacks as though she was anticipating them, and he struggled to catch all of hers. At no point could either of them get a certain, killing strike past the other’s defenses.

The fight had come to an impasse, but not a standstill. They were constantly on the move, dancing around the prone bodies of the stormtroopers, slashing and thrusting and blocking, rebounding off walls. Sweat matted hair to Eli’s face and his lungs raked for breath; only by drawing on the Force could he endure, and he could feel the same was true for Kyra.

They both knew that this entire trap had been orchestrated to bring about this confrontation. Chalk had expertly lured the rebels into Praxal VII with the promise of freeing Gar Stazi; he’d gotten Eli to come here with the certainty that the rebels would send their sole Force-user on this important mission.

At the beginning, when Eli had gone to Chalk seeking help to destroy the Tho Yor on Tython, he’d told himself and the regent that he wasn’t going to be a mere Federation enforcer. They would be partners in making sure the Force stayed silent. That was still true, but over the past three years Eli had been drawn into Chalk’s war with the rebels and had clashed with

Kyra again and again. It wasn't the fate he'd wanted, but he'd resigned himself to it.

Eli managed to press Kyra against one scorched wall long enough for the contingent of guards behind them to push ahead and chase the rebels who'd run toward the airlock. Once it was just the two of them in the hallway, Kyra summoned a strong Force-push that slammed Eli back-first into the opposite wall. His whole body hurt but he ducked and rolled out of the way so her fierce horizontal slash sparked across the bulkhead. Eli rolled and sprung up, batting aside her downward swipe and thrusting for her face. Kyra snapped back, barely dodging, and skirted away.

Panting, Eli faced her from two meters away. "There's no chance of escape," he told her. "We have an interdiction field all around Praxal VII, plus a frigate and a squad of TIEs. This was all a trap."

"I figured that much," she breathed through clenched teeth.

"Chalk wants live prisoners... But he's willing to settle for you dead."

"Well then come at me," she snarled.

Eli came at her. He pushed her back five steps with a flurry of attacks, hoping to knock her into the bodies of the stormtroopers and get her off-balance. Kyra knew that, of course, and he expected her to jump over the bodies and perhaps make a run for the door her friends had gone through. Instead she stood her ground, planted staggered feet on the debris-strewn floor, and summoned a burst of Force energy meant to knock Eli back. He withstood it, but Kyra's next attack took him by surprise.

She came as a flurry of white. It was faster than any of the attacks he'd levelled at her and he could feel the anger behind it. She was giving herself over to it, like a Sith apprentice would. Eli had been Sith once and he was loathe to dip back into the black rage that had, for years, consumed his life. He did his best to deflect, one strike at a time, and when he got an opening he did a quick Force-propelled backward leap, out of her striking range.

"Your Jedi friends didn't teach you that," he told her.

"Some things are self-taught," she said, and came at him again, a tornado of deadly white.



That was his old lightsaber, Eli knew, one he'd made as an apprentice Jedi, used still as an apprentice Sith, and finally surrendered to her on Rohakalla. He'd planned to never use a lightsaber again after that. But even then he'd known what the universe thought about his plans.

Gripping his new saber tight in both hands, Eli lifted the weapon high and met her storm, white against white.

Five TIE Predators swooped down on the shuttle, raining green death. The boxy ship tried to evade but it was simply too big and too slow a target. Laserfire scattered across its weakened shields as the TIEs came around for another pass. They'd already taken out two of the Crossfires that had settled over the shuttle to defend it but two more were coming around.

"All ships, break formation," Gunner called. "Let the shuttle go, it's got no place to run."

On her command the TIEs scattered. The Crossfires were ferocious, pumping out two proton torpedoes each and following it up with laserfire. Gunner evaded the torp aimed at her with a series of scissoring twists, but Skull Eleven wasn't so lucky; the torp broke through his shields and a hail of laserfire finished him off. He didn't even have time to eject before a great fireball consumed his ship.

He'd been one of her newer pilots, but the death still stung. Gunner had handpicked every member of her elite squadron and every loss still hurt. She wrenched her fighter around to track Eleven's killer and laced laserfire across its starboard flank. At the same time another Predator dove in from its port, and together they pounded its shields from either side, squeezing it. The Crossfire tried to run but the TIEs slowed speed to track it until they collapsed shields on both flanks. Laserfire converged, tore through hull, and ripped the snubfighter apart.

"Told you we make a good team, Lead," the other TIE pilot said. Rimmon, again.

"We can share that kill," Gunner said as they formed up alongside each other.

Just then Skull Ten called, "Lead, that shuttle's making a run for the prison!"

Gunner checked her scanners. It was indeed cutting a straight

line for Asteroid Cresh as fast as its engines would allow. Apparently someone was calling for help, and even if there was no place to run, the shuttle would try to answer.

It was futile in more ways than one. Gunner said, "Skull Nine, help Ten with that last Crossfire. I'll take the shuttle myself."

With a bit of reluctance, Rimmon said, "Copy, Lead. Happy hunting."

Gunner hoped so. She put all power to engines and chased the shuttle herself. The craft had a rear-facing laser cannon but she was able to avoid its attacks with nimble twitches of the control stick. As soon as she got in firing range she peppered the shuttle's shields with laser blasts. They'd already been weakened by attack runs from the TIEs and Gunner doubted they could take much more.

She never took her attention off the shuttle, not even to check scanners. She trusted her Skulls to keep her back clear and concentrated on avoiding the rear-firing laser cannon. Losing herself in the battle she reacted on reflexes and adrenaline, thumb constantly tapping the trigger until she wore down and finally pierced the shields.

With its defenses gone, there was nothing the shuttle could do but die. Her first laser barrage scorched and peeled back its armor plating. The second tore through bulkheads and ripped the ship apart. Its internal atmosphere flash-combusted, which in turn ignited its fuel cores, turning it into a tumbling fireball. Momentum still carried it toward the prison, but it would burn out long before it reached Asteroid Cresh.

Gunner took a deep breath, then thumbed on her comm and proudly announced, "Skulls, this is Lead. The shuttle is down, repeat, shuttle is down. The rebels have no place to run. It's over."

Anger was fuel like nothing else. Kyra had come to understand that on her own. It was easy to be angry because there was so much to be angry about: the deaths she'd just felt in the Force, this trap meant to snare her, the hopelessness of this war, the ingenious brutality of Hogrums Chalk, everything all the way to back to her parents' deaths when she'd been just a child.

Jaou had counseled her against giving into anger. So had Ganner, though she'd seen him do it himself. Right now she

needed it to endure the fight against Eli.

Despite leading this trap to snare her, he'd been fighting defensively for most of the battle. The former Sith apprentice was loathe to give in to his anger once more and sought instead to fight from a place of inner emptiness, driven not by emotion or ego but the cold logic that dictated- to him, at least- that the Force needed to be eradicated from the galaxy.

It gave Eli the power to endure her attacks, but not to counter her rage. He planned to outlast her, to disarm her, to capture her and take her back to Coruscant as a prize for Chalk, leaving the rebel effort permanently crippled by her loss.

The deaths Kyra had just felt- probably members of the rebel rescue team sent to extract them- jarred her from her state of anger. She stepped back from Eli long enough to reach out and feel Ganner and Asaak, still alive but desperate. They were all trapped on this asteroid together now. Mission protocol dictated that none of them could be captured alive, but the prison guards would clearly try. They might even succeed.

Kyra, with her blazing lightsaber, could ensure otherwise.

She cursed and, drawing hard breath, took another step away from Eli. He said, "You felt it, didn't you? your rescue ship is gone. *Surrender.*"

He was almost pleading. Kyra took another step back; he took one forward but no more. Behind her was the pile of downed stormtroopers, beyond it the open door. Beyond that, Ganner and Asaak and whoever else had survived.

"There is nothing you can do now," Eli said. "Don't make me kill you."

She could tell he didn't want to. She could use that. Slowly, Kyra squatted down. She shut off her lightsaber and held it out with one stretched arm, like she was going to place it on the floor. Eli kept his saber-tip pointed at her but she could feel his tentative relief.

Then she grabbed the stormtrooper bodies behind her and threw them in the air. They flew over her hunched shoulders, right toward Eli, and he fumbled with his lightsaber for the critical second, bringing it down so as not to cut through his own men.

White-armored bodies crashed into his black one, and all of them went down. Kyra felt no triumph. She rose, turned, and

sprinted through the open door, following the Force toward her friends so that she might join them and get ready to die together.

Because she knew what to look for, Anj was the first Rogue to spot the interdiction mine. The slight fuzzing on one corner of her sensor screen was the betraying marker, and she called the nearest Rogues to help her investigate the source of the jamming. It was a costly search; while they used scanners and squinted eyes to locate the gravity well generator, the TIEs demolished the entirety of Rogue Squadron's third flight, and with it the shuttle they'd been tasked to protect.

With the shuttle gone there was no way the mission could be a success. The infiltration team aboard the asteroid- which included people Anj trusted and even cared about- were trapped, and she didn't know if capture or death was a better fate.

She couldn't afford to think about that. Right now all that mattered was a squad leader's highest priority: the survival of her pilots.

Rogue Three was the one to finally spot the spherical pulse mass mine. He dove after it, lasers blazing, and the other Crossfires fell in after him. The Hapan mines devoted almost all their power to keeping the artificial gravity wells on and had little to spare for defense. Once uncovered, they were easy targets, and after only two passes, the Rogues were able to burst it. The fireball died quickly, and with it the interdiction field that had kept them trapped at Praxal VII.

Anj immediately checked her sensors. Now that the jamming was gone she had a clearer view: nine TIEs approaching, one Imperial frigate holding back, the asteroid prison impenetrable. Most important of all: no gravity well.

As Rogue Two settled on her wing he asked, "What now, Lead? Do we bug out?"

Anj felt sick in her stomach. She knew what she should do: punch into hyperspace and take her Rogues with her, because those TIEs would catch up soon and there was nothing they could do for Kyra, Ganner, or the other people on the asteroid.

She'd had to make hard choices in wartime before, but they never got any easier.

Anj hesitated, watching her scanners and the incoming TIEs, calculating the seconds before they'd have to jump to lightspeed, delaying the final awful order she'd have to give.

There was no way out for her friends in the prison, only for her pilots. She couldn't save the mission but she could at least save her squad, and convince herself after the fact it had been enough. Anj licked her lips to wet them and said, "All Rogues, get ready to jump on—"

"Hold it, Lead!" Rogue Five called. "I have incoming on sensors."

She checked her scanners and saw a new signal, ambiguous yellow marking neither friend nor foe. The ship looked mid-sized, larger than the shuttle that had just blown up but far smaller than the Imp frigate.

Anj checked telemetry; it was racing inbound for the asteroid at impressive speed. She snapped, "All Rogues, fall in on the newcomer."

She didn't know what it was coming in, but she could hope for a miracle. The Crossfires formed a fight formation and shot back toward Praxal VII. The TIEs would be on them soon, from multiple vectors, and they'd have to break and tangle with them, but Anj was willing to risk it. Four TIEs were also racing for the newcomer, as eager to find out its identity as they were.

Anj glanced at her sensors again and saw the yellow marker had turned green. The friendly ship's ID came up bright and clear: *Free Agent*.

Smiling fiercely, Anj called on her pilots to break formation, engage the TIEs, and begin the battle anew.

"Three TIEs coming in hot, starboard side," Ania Solo said as she glanced at her sensors. "Jao, tell me you're ready."

"Of course I'm ready," he said from the gunnery controls behind her.

His voice was tense; the emergency hail from *Paramount* had been short but they knew exactly what they'd been called to jump into. Sure enough, TIEs were losing behind them, the Praxal VII prison lay dead ahead, one of the four asteroids was unshielded, and when Ania checked the frequency *Paramount* had given them she found the steady pulse of a beacon, denoting the rebel teams' location on that rock.

Sounding far calmer than either of the humans, AG-37 said, "Beginning evasive maneuvers. I suggest you hold on to your entrails."

For a second Ania wondered if the assassin droid was trying to be funny. Then he threw *Free Agent* into a series of twisting maneuvers with precision only a machine could manage. Humans could barely handle the g-forces and Ania gripped the arms of her co-pilot's chair tight to avoid being thrown around too badly. Green laserblasts aimed at them lanced past the cockpit viewport, but a few shuddered against their aft shields.

"Jao, can you get a shot?" she asked.

"I'm *trying*." Behind her, Jao Assam wrestled with weapon controls and fired *Free Agent*'s turret guns backward. With both the TIEs and their own freighter slipping wildly through space, she knew any successful shot would be a lucky one.

Nonetheless, she checked her sensors and saw on TIE fall back, like it had taken a glancing hit. The other two were on them hard but AG-37 was still dancing and, more importantly, Rogue Squadron's fighters were soaring in for the rescue. They had TIEs of their own to tangle with but Ania watched as four pushed ahead to clear off *Free Agent*'s tail.

Ania felt elated, but not for long. One TIE landed a series of hits on their shields. The ship shuddered and a warning light flashed on AG-37's console.

"What is that?" Ania asked frantically.

"The power coupler on the aft-port shield generator is overloaded," AG-37 said, even as he twisted them through another harsh maneuver. The asteroid prison loomed ahead, close but still too far.

"Will it hold?" she asked.

"That depends—" another hard twist; "On whether we take more hits on that section."

Ania cursed. Times like these were when she really wished they still had Sauk onboard, but they'd have to make do without their mechanic.

Thankfully, that batch of Rogues arrived just in time. The two chasing TIEs took heavy aft fire before breaking off and running, torpedoes trailing behind them. As AG-37 finally set them on a straight-line run for the prison, Rogue Leader's familiar voice crackled on their headsets.

“*Free Agent*, do you have the beacon marked?” Anj asked.

“We have it,” Ania confirmed, and checked sensors. “Looks like it’s coming from a spot near the surface, southwest hemisphere.”

“They must be at an airlock portal. Get them out of there!”

“Understood. Keep our backs clear.”

“Will do.”

Anj clicked off and AG-37 sent them flying straight toward the asteroid. Its craggy surface filled the viewport until it seemed like they were going to collide. Then the droid cut thrusters, swung their nose ninety degrees, and nimbly nudged their port-side airlock to couple with the asteroid’s emergency exit portal.

“Jao, please remain at post to man weapons,” AG-37 said. “Ania, they may need some help coming aboard.”

“Got it,” she said, and unlocked her crash webbing.

Ania hurried from the cockpit, down the long central corridor to the airlock, fast but not too fast; there was no telling if they’d take another severe hit. Thankfully she got all the way without being knocked around, and when she saw their airlock was successfully sealed with the prison’s, she manually started to open the portal.

The heavy metal door grinded aside. As second after it started the prison’s door slid open as well. Ania had no idea what was waiting for them on the other side. They’d been on mid-transit on the edge of this sector when they’d gotten the emergency message from *Paramount*. Ania only knew that a rebel infiltration team had broken into the prison with the goal of freeing Admiral Gar Stazi, a big prize if they could pull it off.

Ania didn’t even know for sure it *was* a rebel team on the other side. As the doors slid apart she pulled her blaster from its holster and kept it at her hip, ready to raise and shoot.

She nearly dropped it when she saw who was on the other side. Kyra’s sweat-smearred face gleamed in the pure-white glow of her lightsaber. When she saw Ania the younger woman blinked in surprise and flushed slightly. That scar on her left cheek, the one Ania still wasn’t used to seeing, colored darker.

Ania came to her senses first. She stepped back and waved Kyra forward. “Come on. We’re your rescue. Let’s go.”

Kyra shut off her saber and hurried through the airlock. Next

came a tall, pink-skinned Togruta. Ania had seen him before and knew he was an ex-Jedi but she couldn't remember his name; despite lending occasional help on request, *Free Agent* wasn't a full member of the resistance. Next came a pale-skinned human with buzz-cut red hair she knew as Ganner Krieg. He had a pair of legs jutting out from beneath either armpit, and Ania watched as he and a middle-aged woman in an orange prisoner's jumpsuit carried a third being, an unconscious Ishi Tib, into the airlock vestibule.

As soon as they were through they lowered the Ishi Tib to the deck. The Togruta said, "That's it. Let's go."

Ania looked through the airlock and saw a long, dark tunnel. "No Stazi?"

"He was never here," rasped Ganner. "It was a trap."

Ania looked to Kyra. The younger woman's face set to a scowl and she nodded. Right then Ania had a very hard time seeing the girl she'd rescued from debt slavery on Socorro four years back, the one who'd reminded Ania so much of herself before she'd made her worst mistakes. That had been presumption of her part; wishful thinking. Kyra was not Ania Solo and the choices she'd made since- mistakes or not- were all her own.

There was nothing Ania could do for Kyra now except get her out of here. She pounded the airlock controls and resealed the door, then tapped the vestibule's wall-mounted comm.

"A-gee, we're all aboard. Get us out of here!"

"Excellent. I suggest you all hold on to something."

As soon as they were separated from the asteroid, AG-37 swung them hard and pushed for freedom. Ania and the others sunk to the deck and pressed their backs against the corners of the room to keep from being totally knocked around. Only the unconscious Ishi Tib on the floor seemed immune to the violent jerks and jukes *Free Agent* took, and there was a few unnerving moments when the ship shook as TIEs landed shots.

But Praxal VII was no massive planet, with a big gravity well to climb free of. Less than forty seconds after detaching from the asteroid, *Free Agent* lurched into hyperspace. Ania smiled in relief, and so did the older woman in prisoner's orange. The Togruta exhaled and bowed his head; Ganner looked into the bulkhead, as though staring at things he'd left behind.



As for Kyra, she was looking into nothing too, but somehow Ania could tell she was staring not at the past but at a battle yet to come.

Watching the events at Praxal VII had felt to Gar Stazi like a contest between himself and Warden Zegorian. It was a battle in which neither of them could play an active part, and they'd been stuck watching their respective sides struggle in the space around the asteroids. When the rescue shuttle exploded, Stazi had struggled to keep the crushing defeat from his face. When the freighter had appeared out of nowhere, Zegorian had straightened in his chair, tense and anxious.

When that ship jumped to hyperspace, Stazi allowed himself a long exhalation. It wasn't an expression of triumph, but of relief. At least some of the beings who'd bravely risked their lives to free him had escaped to fight another day. That was something worth holding to.

Zegorian wasn't willing to concede defeat just yet, but was prepared for it. Awkwardly, he rose from his desk and walked over to the window that looked out on the broad mudfield, prison walls, and lush jungle beyond. He fitted himself with an earpiece and activated it, allowing Stazi to listen to one-half of the conversation.

The Duros sat patiently in his chair as the human said, "This is Zegorian. I see the battle's complete. Can I have a sitrep? Yes.... I see. Good. Any prisoners? ...Ah. How many escaped? Did *she* get away? All right. Thank you."

Zegorian tapped off his earpiece, turned, and looked on Stazi with a brittle smile. "You'll be happy to know that a handful of your rebel friends escaped, but only a handful. Senator Nelloran, who we've kept incarcerated at Praxal VII, has been recovered and will be returned to his cell."

Stazi tried not to look deflated. "And the prisoners?"

"Three rebels were killed. Four escaped." Zegorian gave a tiny shrug. "But they failed utterly in their objective, and your retrieval team lost half its ships. Not a good day for your kind."

Stazi had to agree, but Zegorian's confidence seemed forced. Curious, he asked, "Who is *she*? It sounds like she eluded you, whoever she is."

Unfortunately, Zegorian's smile got tighter. "You don't even

know about your greatest champion, do you? That's amusing. And the best part is that you never, ever will." The warden shifted eyes to the skeletal guard droid who'd been looming behind Stazi all this time. "Take him back to his cell."

There seemed no point in argument. Stazi stiffly pushed himself out of the chair, gaze the warden the tiniest nod, then walked out the door. Another droid and his plump Elomin handler were waiting for him, and Stazi allowed himself to be marched out of the warden's bunker.

A faint rain fell from purple-tinted clouds. Stazi savored that feeling, and the rank smell of the surrounding jungle. His prison lay ahead, and once he passed through the door there would be nothing but solitude, metal walls, and cold recycled air, for a long, long time.

But beings were still out there, fighting for him. Zegorian hadn't intended it, but he'd given Stazi a scrap of what he'd needed. As they marched him into the metal maw and down the prison's gray-walled throat, he did what he resolved to do what he'd always done in his darkest hours: wait and hold to hope.

## Chapter Eight

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Affairs of family had been settled with an ease that pleased and frankly surprised Cade. That meant he could turn the rest of his stay on Kiffex to making sense of his new family heirlooms.

They'd passed to him through Droo, by way of his uncle Nat. Some items, like the projector with decades-old family holos, seem to have been passed down by his grandmother Jade. Other stuff looked even older. It wasn't a surprise that some items had been passed down the Skywalker line through generations, but he had a hard time telling how many. The days when his father Kol and ancestor Luke would show up to him as blue Force-ghosts were long gone. He was glad of that, but right now he'd have welcomed any hint.

"These datacards are definitely old," said Micah. "I'm guessing early Long Peace, maybe even pre-Vong invasion."

That would put them at over a century. Cade was sitting in his late uncle's workshop, talking to Nat's adopted son. Unlike Skeeto and Ahnah, who'd visible matured in the six years since he'd seen them, the Cathar cub looked mostly the same. Chalk it up to his species' slower aging.

"How can you tell they're from that far back?" Cade asked.

"See these braces here?" He tapped the thin metal on each corner. "These are made of an illythium alloy. Lightweight and non-conductive, good for datacard frames. The only planet they mined illythium on got taken by the Vong and terraformed. Once offworld stores ran out, manufacturers switched to other materials."

The kid was good. "So these things are damn old. Explains why they won't fit into any of the card-readers on *Mynock*."

They've got to fit somewhere, though."

He looked deliberately around the shop. His uncle had acquired quite a collection of junk. It tended to do more with starship and airspeeder parts than antique computer equipment, but Cade wouldn't discount any treasure here.

Micah noticed his gaze and said, "Well, let's take a look. I think we *might* have something..."

The Cathar rose from the workbench and began searching shelves and drawers. He clomped around on metal legs, another gift from Nat. They were loud but moved as nimbly as real ones.

Cade felt tempted try counting all the good deeds his uncle had done, all the lives he'd improved even while living humbly as Bantha Rawk, starship mechanic. Nat had once told him that he'd done more good in that guise as he ever had as a Jedi; Cade didn't know if it was true but Nat had believed it. Certainly his uncle had gotten more satisfaction out of helping individual people, one at a time, than he ever had with the Skywalker legacy weighing him down.

Despite his running from it, Nat had done his legacy proud in ways large and small.

"Ah, this looks like it."

Cade blinked and looked behind him to see the Cathar's metal feet perched on a wooden stool. The thing almost tipped over as he leaned and reached into a top-level shelf stuffed with mechanical equipment. Cade got to his feet, ready to catch him if he *did* fall, but Micah tipped the stool back to balance and came down holding a rectangular device in his hands, the size of two flat hands held together. Cade could tell it was old, and not just for the dust. The corners' sharp angles were worn down and a few dents speckled the rim of circular holo-projector on top.

He raised a brow. "You sure that thing'll work?"

"Only one way to find out." Micah took the device to the room's central power conduit and plugged it in. He tapped one button and purred with pleasure as the machine's three diodes lit clear green.

"Let's give it a shot," the Cathar said. "Any card you want to try first?"

There was almost a dozen, and Cade had no idea what to do

with any of them. He handed Micah the one he'd been fingering before. "Let's see what you can do."

With an eager, fang-baring smile, Micah slid the datacard into the reader's slot. The little machine whirred and its diodes blinked. When the whirring stopped, one turned yellow, the other two red.

"Well," said Cade, "That ain't good."

"No." Micah's face fell. He hit a button and ejected the card. "Let me try another one."

They spent the next ten minutes going through every card, and the result was the same each time. It was obvious this wouldn't work by the third card but they went through each one just to be sure.

When they finally resigned themselves, Micah set the device aside and Cade asked, "Got anything else that can ready those cards?"

"I don't know... There might be something in another shed. Let's ask Skeeto."

Taking the cards with them, they left the workshop and went outside. The young man was easy to find: he was standing beneath *Mynock* next to C-3PO and behind Deliah, the latter of whom stood atop a short ladder and had her upper half thrust into the freighter's port-side access hatch. Presumably this was some kind of instruction, though Skeeto seemed to be paying more attention to Deliah's lower half.

Cade came up behind the distracted cousin and slapped him on the back of the head. "Getting some lessons, *pateesa*?"

Skeeto had the decency to look abashed. "Deliah was showing me how you've rigged up the fuel injectors to speed up engine start-ups."

"Yeah, that comes in handy when you want a fast getaway. Hey Blue, mind if we borrow your pupil for a second?"

"Go right ahead," she replied without taking her head out of *Mynock*.

Quickly, Cade and Micah explained the situation. Skeeto frowned as he listened.

"If we *do* have another card-reader like that, I don't know where it is," he admitted. "You might want to try the north shed. Uncle Bantha kept a lot of old junk in there. I still haven't cataloged all of it." He glanced at the ship spread above them.

“Do you think *Mynock* has a reader? It’s pretty old.”

“Yeah, but not *that* old,” Cade said. “Besides, her guts are all up to current specs. Mostly.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said C-3PO, “But may I see the datacards in question?”

Micah held a pair in front of the droid’s photoreceptors. “These look familiar?”

“Ah, yes, I am familiar with that model. Quite nostalgic. I say, it’s most unfortunate most datacard readers are currently incapable of backwards-compatibility beyond fifty or so standard years. Such a length of time is considerable for human lifespans but, if you don’t mind my saying, not for other long-lived species such as Wookies, Hutts, Muuns, Falleen-”

“Thanks, Threepio. We get it,” said Cade.

“You’re welcome, sir.”

He turned back to Skeeto and Micah. “So we fish through the north shed? Is that it?”

“We can try,” the younger human said. “Your best bet might be checking offworld. I’m sure there’s gotta be someplace that sells old card readers.”

“Yeah, but for how much? Nah, I’m gonna leach off family generosity while I can.”

Micah huffed laughter. “I see you haven’t changed after all, Cade.”

As he decided whether to take offence, C-3PO said, “Excuse me, Master Cade, but I think that may be unnecessary.”

He looked back to the droid. “And why is that?”

“As I was attempting to say, sir, fifty years or even one hundred are not necessarily insurmountable for droids. I am quite certain that Artoo-Detoo has a reader for that model datacard built into his mainframe.”

He laughed and slapped C-3PO’s metal shoulder. “Well why didn’t you tell us, professor?”

“Well, sir, I was trying-”

“Where’s Artoo now?”

Finally pulling her head out of *Mynock*, Deliah called down, “He’s up in the cockpit, running diagnostics.”

“Mind if we borrow him too?”

She sighed. “You’re taking all my boys away, Cade. Just promise to give ‘em back when you’re done.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her, and led the others up into the ship.

They found R2-D2 as expected, in the rear of the cockpit and plugged into the main computer socket. Cade patted the astromech’s blue dome and explained the situation. R2 tweeted his understanding and obligingly removed himself from the computer to give this his full attention.

“Might as well start with any card,” Cade told Micah. The Cathar handed him one at random, and Cade squatted in front of R2-D2 to slide the card into a vertical-slit port beneath his photoreceptor. It fit perfectly and slid fully inside.

“What have you got, Artoo?” he asked. “Can you read what’s on it?”

Some processor deep within R2 whirred, and the droid made a low thoughtful noise. Then Cade heard a click from inside the droid, and then a stutter. And then, without explanation, the droid released a horrified wail. Warning lights on his dome flashed and for a second he rocked violently back-and-forth on his stout legs. And then, just as inexplicably, a shudder ran through the droid and his lights went off; all processing sounds from within ceased. It was like he’d completely shut down.

For a second everyone stared in shock. Then C-3PO wailed, “Oh no! What have we done?”

Nobody in the Rawk starship barn was a droid specialist, but they were all good with machines and had rudimentary knowledge of astromech design. After they moved R2-D2 to the bottom level of the main house, everyone took turns working on him. Even Ahnah showed up, again in her Kiffar Guard uniform, to help her mother and step-brothers as they peeled apart R2’s casings and examined his insides.

They removed the datacard with only a little difficulty. The thing had been fried by the power surge that had roasted R2 and so had some of the droid’s internal processors. Droo found replacement parts for most and quickly installed them. She insisted that the surge hadn’t damaged any of his core systems, which did little to calm C-3PO. The protocol droid staggered back and forth while they worked, muttering constant recriminations on himself.

“Oh, this is all my fault,” he babbled. “I was the one who

suggested we use Artoo to read those datacards! I invited his doom! Curse my defective processor! I should have stayed on that junkyard on Socorro! Then none of this would have happened!”

As she stood next to Jariah and watched Droo work, Ahnah muttered, “That’s the most neurotic machine I’ve ever seen. Is he always this bad?”

“This is slightly worse than usual,” Jariah replied. He didn’t blame Threepio for getting upset; hell, he was worried about Artoo also. He just wished the protocol droid would shut up and was damned tempted to walk over and flip the shut-off switch on the back of his neck.

Eventually Droo announced, “I think I’ve done all I can here. Let’s try to switch him back on.”

“Oh, thank you, Mistress Rawk,” babbled C-3PO. “If you’ve repaired him I will be in your debt forever! My devotion will be unparalleled, it would shame even a Wookiee!”

“No need to get hasty, goldenrod,” said Cade. He and Deliah stood watching on the other side of the room. “Let’s see if it works first.”

Skeeto and Micah closed up R2’s panels and stood the heavy droid up onto all three feet. Droo went around behind him and touched the activation switch at the bottom rim of his dome. In the breathless silence they heard the faint spark of the droid’s electric synapses flaring, and a few of his lights blinked on.

And then, with a miserable groaning sound, everything shut down again.

“Oh, no!” wailed C-3PO. “He’s done for! Doomed!”

“Threepio, shut the hell up,” Cade said. “Droo, you wanna try again?”

The woman tapped R2’s activation button, and this time nothing happened at all. His metal carapace stayed dark and still. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Cade. I did what I could, but I’m no droid expert. I know a few I could get you in touch with. I gotta say, though, Artoo’s a really old model, and the Force knows how many weird modifications he’d had over the decades. Even a good droid doctor’s gonna have a hard time making sense of him.”

She knew better than to suggest they just give up on him. Jariah asked, “There docs on Kiffex?”



“Kiffu, actually. Just a short hop away.”

“It’s worth looking into,” Cade sighed. “Give me the names, I’ll check ‘em out.”

After rattling them off Droo added, “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

“Ain’t your fault. This was just from freak malfunction. Artoo being as old and patchwork as he is, something little could set him off the wrong way.”

Everyone contemplated R2-D2’s quiet shell like it was the corpse of a dear friend, which wasn’t far off. Grim silence draped the room. The only sound was metal feet tapping duracrete as C-3PO tittered anxiously.

Jariah sighed. “You got something to say, Threepio.”

The droid hesitated. “Master Cade told me-”

“Say, it, Threepio,” Cade told him. “I’ve got a feeling I’m already thinking it.”

“I see. Sir, you know what it took to repair me after the dreadful state I had been in for decades. That I am functioning as I am now, with personality routines and seventy-two-percent restored memory capacity, is nothing short of a miracle. If you are looking for a droid doctor who can revive Artoo-”

“Then we go to the very best,” Cade crossed his arms and looked to Blue and Jariah. “That okay with you? Could be costly.”

Deliah put a hand on his elbow. “We’ve still some of Rav’s loot stored up.”

They’d had it stored for years. When they’d heisted it, Jariah had told himself that with this he could buy some warm sunny moon and enjoy the rest of his life. Something always kept getting in the way of his retirement. Too often they’d gone chasing mystic ancient Force-relics. Fixing Artoo was a simpler, more personal goal. Jariah liked that a lot more.

Besides, he’d get bored with retirement.

“Best to spend it on a good cause then,” he told the others.

“My thoughts exactly,” Cade said. “Don’t worry, Threepio. If anyone can fix Artoo, Guri’s people can.”

They didn’t rush to depart after that, but they didn’t linger either. After they’d loaded the astromech onto *Mynock*, watched over all the while by a fretting C-3PO, the three flesh-and-blood crew went back outside to say goodbyes. The

hanging question of R2's fate took any joy out of them.

Jariah exchanged a handshake with Micah, a back-slapping hug with Skeeto, and a few polite words with Droo, who'd never stopped giving him suspicious looks.

When it came time to say farewell to Ahnah, neither of them knew quite what to do. Jariah felt stupid holding out for a handshake but a hug wouldn't work either. Through the Force he could dimly feel her confusion too.

With hands on her hips she said, "Hells, Jariah. Just take care of Artoo."

"That's the plan."

"And take care of yourself."

"Yeah, and you take care of *yourself*. You're the Guardian. You probably get in more danger than me nowadays."

"I doubt that. Once a scoundrel—"

"Yeah, fine." He awkwardly ran a hand through his dreadlocks. "Whatever happens, I'm sure you'll do great. You've always had your stuff together. It's what caught my eye in the first place."

"Thanks," she said, and smiled.

He glanced back at the landing ramp. Cade and Deliah were staring up it, and the latter waved at him to come.

"Well, guess I'd better go. No point getting mushy."

"You're right. No point." She took fists off her hips. "Besides, my boyfriend wouldn't like it."

"Your.... Ah." Jariah chuckled. The damn Force never told him what he really needed to know. "Well, take care of him too."

"Sure thing." Ahnah stepped forward, put a hand on his arm, perked up on her toes and kissed him once on the cheek. She dropped back, releasing his arm, she said, "For luck."

Jariah smirked, shook his head, and went up the ramp without looking back. Minutes later, *Mynock* was soaring into Kiffex's sky and setting course for Esseles and the Massad Thurmble Memorial Foundation. Jariah let Cade and Blue lead them out. His mind was back on Kiffex, what he'd gained and left behind. It felt like there was more of the former, though he couldn't explain why. Life was a strange thing.

## Chapter Nine

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The return to *Paramount* hardly felt triumphant. *Free Agent* had plenty of room to set down in the carrier's sprawling hangar, as did the surviving Crossfires from Rogue Squadron. The pilots dismounted first, then the freighter's rescued passengers. Kyra and Asaak went down the ramp first, followed by Cev'mor and Yana Oris. As he went down last, Ganner tried to focus on the civilian woman. She was still in her orange prisoner's jumpsuit and she surveyed the hangar like it was a new jail cell. In a way it was; she'd never go back to her old life again.

But she was alive, and she lived because of Ganner. That was something. It didn't salvage the mess of this mission, and it certainly didn't make up for the two brave soldiers he'd been forced to kill rather than allow them to be captured. Taige and Rolvis would stay with him for a long time.

The dour group was welcomed by a single blue-skinned Chagrian woman. Since the death of her senator husband, Saarai Derrol had thrown herself into the rebel cause with surprising ardor. Ganner was frequently impressed by her political and tactical acumen. It was impressive from any civilian, especially one so young.

Saarai tried a brave smile and said, "Welcome back. I'm glad some of you made it."

"We couldn't even get Nelloran out," Asaak shook his head. "We were close, but... We couldn't do it."

"The mission was a trap from the start. It's impressive any of you made it out." Saarai shifted eyes to Kyra. "I'm sure you played a part in that."

"Some," the human said, "But I'm not the one you should really thank."

Ganner looked behind him. Ania Solo and her towering droid were still in the ship, but Jao Assam was walking down the ramp to join them. Ganner hadn't know the man well when they were Imperial Knights together and didn't particularly know him now. Jao helped the resistance from time to time, but for the most part he was off with Ania Solo, coping with the Force's silence in a different way.

"You can hold your thanks for now," Jao said grimly. He stopped beside Ganner and put hands on his hips. "I'm guessing you want to talk to me."

"That's right," said Saarai. "But not just yet."

She looked sideways and spotted Anj Dahl departing her Crossfire. Still in her flightsuit, the woman walked swiftly toward them across the deck. When she got close enough Asaak told her, "Thanks for flying cover."

"We did our best," Anj said, frowning. "We still lost five pilots. We were lucky to get out with anything."

"You took out that Hapan pulse mass mine. That counts for a lot."

"I wish we could have done more." Anj ran a hand through her short hair. "If you're planning on debriefing, let me get a shower in first."

"Seconded," said Kyra. "We could all use a clean-up."

"I understand," said Saarai. "Can you all be in the main conference room in one standard hour?"

"That's doable," said Anj, and that others nodded agreement.

Jao seemed the only one ready to get started now. He stepped forward and pulled Saarai to the side for a private talk. As the others started for the hangar exit, Ganner said, "Cev'mor, could you take our new guest to the bridge? See if the captain can find a cabin for her."

The Ishi Tib nodded, and Yana Oris reluctantly joined him. As Kyra followed them for the exit, Ganner put a hand on Asaak's shoulder. "Can you handle the debriefing for me?"

The ex-Jedi didn't need the Force to tell what Ganner was thinking. "I'll have to tell them everything. And you did nothing wrong."

Ganner wasn't sure if Taige and Rolvis would agree. For

better or worse, he'd never find out. "I just... don't see any reason why both of us have to be there."

The Togruta nodded. In their past lives, this would have been an occasion to meditate on the Force, or to consult a sage Master for guidance. Those options were gone now; they both knew they had to deal with pain themselves. As Ganner took his hand off his shoulder, Asaak said, "I'll come by your cabin later and tell you how it went."

"Thank you," Ganner said.

He watched Asaak make his way for the exit, following Cev'mor, Oris, and Kyra through the gate. Jao and Saaraï were still to the side, talking. Alone on the deck, Ganner gave a long sigh and wondered what his friend Antares would have said after today. That man hadn't just killed his comrades but his emperor for sake of the greater good. Ganner wished he'd known that while Antares had still lived, wished he'd been able to help his friend carry that burden.

But Antares had shouldered it the best he could. Ganner could handle this. Gathering resolve the best he could, he stood straight and walked out of the hangar.

Stars passed lazily outside the viewport of *Paramount's* conference room. The carrier was in deep space, far from any inhabited system. Like the rest of the ragtag ships in the rebel fleet, it kept no permanent residence but a list of friendly ports, often illegal, that it sometimes called on to restock and refuel.

Starlight had no ardor and neither did the conversation taking place. Kyra, Anj Dahl, and Asaak Dan each gave their version of what had happened at Praxal VII. None of them relished the events or the telling. Saaraï listened carefully along with the other rebel leaders, and when all three were done she asked Kyra, "Do you think this trap was set specifically for you?"

The human shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Sukharr added, "Eli Horn's presence seems to insist that."

"Chalk sent Eli because he expected me to be there," Kyra said. Saaraï always found it curious that she referred to her repeated foe, in many ways her Federation counterpart, by his first name. "That doesn't mean he set the whole trap for me."

"They were trying hard to take prisoners," Asaak Dan reminded. He'd already told them how poor Ganner Krieg had

had to shoot and kill two stunned comrades. "I think Chalk was hoping to get whatever operatives he could for interrogation. That, I think, and he wanted to humiliate and demoralize us."

It was hard to argue his success on the second point. Lonel Starets looked to Ekorian. "We spent over a month preparing this operation. Was there any hint the intel wasn't genuine?"

The Drallish intelligence chief sighed, and her brown fur bristled. "We used multiple sources on this operation. Everything seemed sure. The fact that Senator Nelloran actually *was* on Praxal VII made the bait seem realistic."

Anj asked, "How many sources said Stazi was in the prison and not just a high-profile prisoner?"

Ekorian looked to Jao Assam. The former Imperial Knight, who'd helped the resistance sporadically while chasing around the galaxy on other missions, leaned forward and folded hands on the table. Grimly he said, "I think I may be at least partly to blame."

He'd already explained all this to Saarai in the hangar, but the others perked up. Starets asked, "What do you mean?"

"Mister Assam put us in contact with his former teacher in the Imperial Knights," Ekorian said. "Yalta Val was the one who told us that Stazi was being held at Praxal VII."

"Do you think he betrayed us?" asked Sukharr, "Or was he fed false intelligence?"

"I don't know," Assam sighed. "I can't believe Master Val would willingly send us into a trap."

Asaak Dan asked, "Your Master Val is an active Imperial Knight, isn't he?"

"As much as any of the Knights are still active."

The Force's silence, combined with efforts by the Chalk administration, had sidelined the once-formidable Imperial Knights and turned them into the regent's glorified bodyguards, and even then it seemed like most of Chalk's security was handled by his personal agents. Saarai often wondered who'd fared worse; the Knights or the Jedi, who'd given up all political power, fled Coruscant, and scattered across the galaxy on a fruitless wild Bantha chase.

She only knew that the Sith, doomed by their own arrogance, had met the worst end.

"How much have you actually told Val?" asked Starets.

"I've told him that the attack on Galactic City was staged, and that the destruction of Bey's fleet was a massacre," Assam said grimly. "I also told him Marasiah Fel is still alive."

He didn't call her empress, Saaraï noted. Nobody did anymore. The Marasiah Fel question hung over the resistance movement; some among the leaders wished she'd come out of wherever she was hiding and publicly denounce her uncle's lies. Others, especially die-hard Alliance partisans, were ambivalent or outright negative in their attitudes toward her. Personally, Saaraï would have taken any help, even from emotionally-damaged ex-monarchs.

"I thought Master Val believed me," Assam said. "I've known the man for almost twenty years. He trusted me when none of the other Knights would. I was sure he'd trust me now. I was sure *I* could trust him."

"He may not have betrayed us intentionally," Sukharr offered. "Chalk may have fed him false information."

"Either way," said Ekorian, "Yalta Val's use as an intelligence asset is gone. He's either an active traitor or has been compromised."

"If Chalk knows what he'd been doing, he's not safe," Assam said. "He could arrest Master Val, even... kill him."

After an uncomfortable silence, Ekorian said, "We can't know the truth without an investigation that is itself too risky. I'm sorry, Mister Assam, but we have to cut out losses and sever all ties to Yalta Val."

Assam's face twisted. He clearly wanted to argue but didn't seem willing to do it here. Saaraï said, "We appreciate your loyalty to your teacher, but for your own sake, you can't risk contacting him again. I'm sorry."

Assam settled back in his seat, arms crossed, and gave an ambiguous nod. Hardly an affirmation of what she'd said, but she decided not to press it. Instead she told Ekorian, "We can't give up on trying to locate Stazi. He has to be in *some* Federation prison."

"It's likely Chalk moves him around from time to time. He may have even been at Praxal VII at some point in the past."

"Do you have other leads?" asked Kyra.

"A few." The Drall's fur bristled again. "After this... incident I will have to vet the sources more thoroughly."

They could all hear Ekorian's shame for this failure, and none tried to assuage her. What happened at Praxal VII was a defeat and could have been a disaster. Their fragile resistance could afford few more of those.

But they'd committed themselves to this hopeless quest nonetheless. Gently, Saarai dismissed Assam. Once he was gone, the seven remaining turned their attention to the future.

"I think we're at a crossroads here," said Starets. "Do we keep trying to find and free Stazi... Or do we set a new goal?"

Sukharr growled, "Chalk will be anticipating us either way, I suspect..."

"Then that gives us full liberty to choose," said Asaak Dan. "I know we had other leads on Stazi's location. We decided on Praxal VII because of Yalta Val's intelligence."

"There were other options," Ekorian nodded. "We'd used multiple sources to narrow it down to five maximum-security prisons scattered throughout the galaxy. All under complete control of the Federation Correctional Authority, and also co-staffed by the Federation Security Bureau."

"Basically, Chalk's secret police," hummed Anj. "Well. I guess breaking into them one-by-one isn't an option."

"No," said Kyra, "But we've narrowed it down to four choices. All we need is the right one, and we can try again."

Most of them looked at her in surprise, but not Saarai. Maybe because she'd once had the Force herself, she understood how the young human thought. Starets had a mind for logistics, Sukharr for battlefield strategy, Ekorian for the minutiae of intelligence. Kyra understood that the universe was an ocean and history was a current; with the Force she could *feel* it.

"Our best chance of making any impact is to liberate Stazi," she said firmly. "With him on our side, all those Alliance senators will take us seriously."

"I can't believe they've all eaten Chalk's lies," said Anj. "Some of them have to know that attack on Coruscant was staged, even if they can't say it out loud."

"I certainly hope so," Saarai said. As Porat's husband she'd become the nexus of an unofficial political network binding various die-hard Alliance senators. Most of the beings she'd interacted with had honorable; she knew some would believe the truth, if properly presented.



Her eyes settled on Anj, and she recalled the one senator that had also been a Rogue Squadron pilot. Monia Gahan's uncle had been one of the last Galactic Alliance triumvirs, imprisoned and later cruelly murdered by Krayt at the start of the genocide on Dac. Nowadays Monia was one of the biggest names on Coruscant; as representative of the genocide's survivors she had a certain moral high ground, and because her constituents were refugees scattered across many worlds, her influence touched them all. That sometimes brought tension; the recent mass-resettlement of Quarren and Mon Cals to Bavinyar had caused the refugees and natives to scuffle over jurisdiction. Monia was at the center of all that.

Anj caught Saara's stare. "I know what you're thinking."

"Are you a Jedi now?" the Chagrian joked weakly.

"I'm not," Asaak Dan said, voice more bitter. "But you're thinking about Monia Gahan, aren't you?"

"What purpose would there be in approaching the senator?" asked Sukharr. "What armaments could she provide? What supplies?"

"I don't know, but it might be worth investigating," Saara said. "I know Coruscant well, and I know Monia."

Starits shook his head. "You're sounding as mad as Assam now. Chalk's sure to be watching Senator Gahan, just as he is Val."

It was a valid point, and Saara chastened herself. Yet the thought remained. Rescuing Stazi would give their movement a vital boost, but they'd be foolish to rest their fate on a single long-shot hope.

Sometimes you had to cast a wider net to snare the best fish. And sometimes you had to take great risk to gain great reward. That was one thing Sith, senators, and rebel fighters could all agree on.

When Jao returned to the hangar, he was comforted by the sight of AG-37 and Ania perched on the freighter's back, going through post-battle survey and repairs like always. Some few, precious things never changed. Instead of immediately going up to join them, he went inside the ship to his cabin. Like everything else aboard *Free Agent* space was cramped, but it felt like home in a way no other place did nowadays. Cade

Skywalker's *Mynock*, during the near-year he'd spent there, hadn't come close.

Jao crouched in front of his bunk and tugged out the drawer beneath it. After his lightsaber had been stolen he'd not bothered to build a new one, or to reclaim it from Darth Talon when they'd both been on Rohakalla. He felt he didn't have the right to wield one without the Force. He had, however, kept the white plasteel armor of an Imperial Knight. He looked at the plates tucked and folded in the drawer, marking each scratch and scrape and remembering how he'd received them. A few had even been in sparring matches with Master Val.

He couldn't accept that his former teacher had betrayed them. The man had stood by him through too much. The only alternative was that he'd been fed false information by Hogrum Chalk, and that meant Val was in danger. Jao had gotten his master into this; now he needed to get him out.

Jao knew that, with absolute conviction. It was the kind of dead certainty he'd felt before. It had driven him to chase Darth Wredd and to abandon his vows as a Knight to follow Ania across the galaxy. At those times he'd thought the Force was commanding him. Since then he'd realized he'd obeyed his own heart and nothing else. He wasn't the first Knight to confuse motivations, and his heart had guided him better than some others'.

He knew where it was guiding him now, and he knew Ania wouldn't like it. With a sigh, Jao closed the drawer and left the cabin. He worked his way to the topside airlock and climbed the ladder out onto *Free Agent*'s back. Ania and AG-37 were checking out the dorsal gun turret as Jao walked carefully across the ship's spine toward them.

Ania saw him and came up from her crouch beside the gun-barrel. "How was your talk?" she called.

"It went as well as could be expected," Jao said. "They sent me away after I told them about Master Val. I wasn't privy to the rest."

"That was their prerogative," said AG-37. "We are not, in any official fashion, members of their resistance."

"I know. I don't hold it against them."

"Your vocal tone indicated vexation."

"I'm not... vexed," he muttered, but his frustration showed.

After an awkward silence, Ania asked, "How did Kyra seem?"

"About what you'd expect. She fought Eli on the asteroid."

"I know. She told me."

That was, by Jao's count, their third encounter since they'd placed themselves on opposite sides of the conflict between Chalk's Federation and the rebels. Or maybe it was the fourth. To the eyes of the rest of the galaxy it was a small conflict, without the stakes, romance, or potential of Gar Stazi's famous resistance to Darth Krayt. Despite all his crimes, Hogrump Chalk was no tyrant. He'd forged a working relationship with a Senate dominated by Alliance worlds and kept the peace between factions. He was even carrying through on many of the promises made by the niece he'd dethroned. Since joining the Mon Cal refugee community on Bavinyar two years ago, Sauk's reports had been mostly favorable toward the Federation resettlement authorities. Most beings Jao, Ania, and AG-37 had encountered on their crisscrossing the galaxy had barely heard of the rebels, and those that did viewed them as terrorists, associating them with the staged attack on Galactic City three years ago.

But Kyra had committed herself. As one of the last Force-users left in the galaxy she'd decided it was her duty to fight for the righteous cause. Maybe Jao would have made the same decision in her place; he could never know. He'd come painfully close to regaining the Force at Rohakalla, only to lose his chance when Eli Horn destroyed the hypergate. The Force's silence had felt more painful than ever three years ago and he'd committed himself to finding another way to regain it.

After three years of scouring the galaxy in conjunction with the Jedi and other interested parties, Jao had mostly come to accept that it wasn't going to happen. He was cut off from the Force forever, and day by day he was still learning to live with the unthinkable.

He looked at Ania. She was watching him carefully. She didn't have Force-powers like the others of the Skywalker line but she'd always been perceptive, and she was especially good at reading Jao. So he just came out with it.

"I have to go back to Coruscant," he said. "I need to see Master Val."

She'd probably been expecting it, but her face creased into a frown. "Jao, the intel he gave you was false. That means he's either a traitor who set you up, or Chalk *knows* he's talking with you and feeding you false intel."

Jao had realized that before everyone started pointing it out. "Master Val's no traitor. That means *he* was set up and he's in danger."

"Then what is your intention?" asked AG-37. "If he has not been seized by Chalk already, he will be under constant surveillance. Going there to meet him will likely lead to both of you being arrested."

"A-gee, he's my *master*. He was the one person in the Knights I knew I could trust."

"I understand your feelings for him. You must also understand that any attempt to warn or retrieve him is quite certainly futile and would result in your destruction as well."

"I'm not an idiot, A-gee."

"Yet you clearly intend to walk into a dangerous situation anyway."

"And I'll walk out of it too." He looked to Ania for help. "That's what we do, isn't it?"

She was especially good at that, but she hesitated here. "Jao, Val's going to be really hot right now. You might want to wait until things cool down."

"You mean until Val's been arrested?"

"I mean don't go rushing in and do something stupid." She smiled weakly. "That *my* specialty, not yours."

"Have you spoken to the resistance leaders about this plan?" asked AG-37.

"I don't think they'd be keen on the idea," he evaded.

"There is no reason they should be. It is an unnecessary risk to all parties."

"I get it, A-gee."

"I'd also remind you that if the rebels are unwilling to smuggle you into Coruscant again, we're unable to help you also."

Jao didn't argue with that one. Since using *Free Agent* to break Marasiah Fel out of prison, they'd kept the ship well clear of Coruscant, and any other planet with major Federation presence. "I can find my own way. We were heading for

Druckenwell anyway. I'm sure I can pick up a small ship there." He added, "I've still got a little of the heist money left."

The riches they'd stolen from space pirate Rav four years ago hadn't been fully depleted, but they'd run down a lot of it chasing false leads on ancient Force-related artifacts. It was getting to the point where they'd need to start doing honest work again.

Ania opened her mouth to argue some more, but froze. Jao turned around, followed her gaze, and saw a new figure crawling out of the hatch and joining them on *Free Agent's* back. As Kyra stepped forward, Jao's eyes were drawn to the gentle sway of the silver lightsaber attached to her belt. He felt a stab of envy.

"It's good to see you remember your way around the ship," Ania told her.

All things considered, the younger woman hadn't spent much time on *Free Agent* compared to *Mynock* or the rebel fleet, but it had been her first, fleeting shelter after escaping Socorro. Kyra's face, which Jao had almost gotten used to looking pinched and stern, relaxed to a nostalgic smile.

"It's not easy to forget," she said. "I wanted to thank you again for saving us back there. I can't believe you were close enough to rescue us."

"We were on the way to Druckenwell when we got the call," Jao said.

Kyra crossed her arms. "So you're headed there now?"

"That's the plan," Ania said. "After that... We'll see."

She must have been glancing at Jao, because Kyra told him, "You're planning to contact Yalta Val, aren't you?"

"I'd like to make sure he's safe."

"And the only way to do that puts *you* in danger."

"Are you going to lecture me about not taking risks?"

He tried to say it with a smile. Neither he nor Ania had been happy when Kyra had thrown her lot in with the rebels. Back when they'd taken her off Socorro they'd gotten into a spat about what kind of future the girl should have, as each had imagined molding Kyra in their own image. They'd been like parents squabbling over a teenager, and the person Kyra had become four years later was something neither of them had expected, or wanted.

Kyra heard the brittleness in his voice and said, "I can't stop you. But I really don't think you should go."

"Well, we'll see. I haven't decided anything yet." Knowing better, he added, "Having a Force-user on my side would be the best possible backup."

"I can't," Kyra said seriously, with a touch of regret. "The resistance is planning its next step. I could have to go anywhere, anytime."

"As in now?" asked Ania.

She blinked. "Well, not *right* now."

"Good." She stepped forward and locked her arm around Kyra's. She tugged her close and added with a sisterly smile, "I know our galley's not exactly luxury dining, but we've got some old favorites I think you'll remember. Assuming you don't have pressing dinner plans."

"Well no—"

"Great. A-gee, how about we head inside and start fixing a meal. I think we're all starved."

"Myself excluded," AG-37 said drolly. "But I understand the organic need for sustenance, and for recreation. If Miss Kyra, wishes, we can get started right away."

The younger woman unhooked her arm from Ania's, looked awkwardly at the group, then admitted, "I'm fine with that."

"Excellent." AG-37 stomped toward the hatch. The others followed and let the droid drop his heavy body inside first. After that Kyra clambered down the ladder and followed him into the bowels of the ship.

Before Ania went down, Jao put a hand on her arm and said, "That was good, back there."

"Well, I do have a way with people." She met his eyes and tilted her head. "*Some* people, anyway."

"Ania, I—"

"I know, I know." She sighed. "I could never tell you what to do anyway."

"Well... likewise."

She smirked, took his arm, and squeezed. "Just give it a little thought before running half-cocked into a danger zone. Like I said, that's *my* specialty."

"I'll give it thought," he promised, and didn't expect to change his mind. But Ania knew that. "At least we can give

Kyra a little time to unwind. The Force knows she needs it.”

“I wish we could give her what she really needs. But nobody can do everything,” Ania said pointedly, squeezed his arm again and released.

After that she lowered herself into the hatch and climbed down the ladder. Jao waited until she was done before descending.

It was tempting to think they could turn back time for one little meal, but Jao knew that wasn’t the case. Sauk had left the ship, the Force had left Jao, and Kyra had gone down a path none of them had foreseen four years ago, least of all her. Ania was the constant thing that held together despite it all. Jao had no idea what would have become of him had he not run into her on Carreras Minor and wasn’t interested in wondering. It would have been a poorer life than what he’d gotten.

Without hesitation, he followed her down the ladder and into their ship.

## Chapter Ten

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Wings spread wide and gleaming in the sun, the glider banked over the forest, tipping its port-side flank toward the mottled greens and reds of the tight-packed trees. From the passenger carriage, bound tight to the living craft's underside, the passengers could see with naked eyes the changes being wrought across the surface of Milagro.

Last century, the planet had been captured by the Yuuzhan Vong, seeded with their bio-engineered life, and despoiled beyond use. Twenty years ago, the Jedi had selected it as one of the hundred worlds of the Ossus Project, Kol Skywalker's lofty plan to rehabilitate Vongformed worlds with the help of the Yuuzhan Vong themselves. It had been Kol's aim to bind the former invaders closer to the Jedi and redeem both in the eyes of the galactic populace.

Marin Solo, then living with her husband and daughter as a civilian freighter captain, had been skeptical from the start; she knew firsthand how Jedi ambitions could crash and burn. When Kol's dream had turned to nightmare she'd been unsurprised, but even Marin hadn't imagined the ruin of Milagro and ninety-nine other worlds was the product of Sith sabotage.

The failure of the Ossus project had kicked off fifteen years of strife that still wasn't over, though most of the galaxy seemed content to accept Hogrum Chalk's peace-giving lie. For those fifteen years, quietly and unnoticed by all, the Yuuzhan Vong shapers who'd helped Kol initially had been working to undo the damage they'd accidentally caused. Finally, quietly and unnoticed, they were making real progress.



Damp wind blew in their faces as the Sekotan glider's passengers leaning against the carriage railing and looked at the forest. Marin cupped a hand over her eyes to keep gray hair from her face as she mapped the swathes of deep green forest and the patches of red and brown.

"Our terraforming has chased away most of the corrupted vegetation," Nei Rin explained. The Yuuzhan Vong shaper stood between Marin and K'Kruhk, grand master of what was left of the Jedi Order. "Six standard months ago this entire area was corrupted. As you can see, we've reduced the dangerous flora to scattered patches."

"Do you expect to eliminate the rest naturally?" asked K'Kruhk. The old Whiphid's fur flapped and tangled in the wind.

"Some parts may prove stubborn," said Nei Rin, "But I believe the current reclamation process will suffice."

"How much of the continent do you think you've recovered?" Marin asked, half-shouting over the wind.

"Approximately seventy percent of the vegetation here has grown in the past two years. The process is moved a bit slower on other continents, but I believe we can completely cleanse Milagro within five years."

The master shaper turned to one of her subordinates and gave an order in Yuuzhan Vong. After that the flyer levelled out and pulled higher. The forest fell away beneath them to give an even better view of the rolling, tree-covered hills. As Nei Rin had said, most of the vegetation was colored a deep fresh green. The red and brown pathed denoting corrupted Vongformed plants were being strangled out by new life.

"Did you accomplish all this by modifying the dhuryam?" asked Marin, referring to the biot the Yuuzhan Vong also called the 'world brain.'

"The Sith corruption started with the dhuryam," Nei Rin said. "Darth Maladi discovered a way to implant memory engrams, corrupt it, and convince it that its own world was hostile. Thus, the dhuryam created dangerous, violent life-forms, like antibodies."

Marin had never met Darth Maladi, but it was clear the late Sith scientist had changed the galaxy several times over, in ways not even Darth Krayt could have managed. "So you

basically reversed Maladi's changes?"

"Nothing so simple. Some memory engrams could be reverted to their original state, but Milagro's dhuryam had to be *taught* this world was not hostile. That was the most difficult part."

"Have you started this process on other worlds?" asked K'Kruhk.

"A few. Chashima. Tynna. Some of my shapers are researching on Duro as we speak." Nei Rin's expression was serious. "Recovering each planet will be an individual process. No two biospheres are the same. But you see our success here. In time I believe this world and the others will be habitable again."

Marin's thought that the Duros, Tynnans, and others wouldn't be happy about coming back to a homeworld still controlled by a Yuuzhan Vong world brain. Cautiously she asked, "Do you have any plans to take this to the government?"

"To the Federation? No." Nei Rin shook her head. "Even if its regent was not... as you said he was, I doubt many in the senate would welcome our proposal."

"If you don't expect beings to actually come back to these worlds, why have you spent the past decade rehabilitating them?"

Nei Rin looked at her in surprise. "A mistake as grave as this *needs* to be corrected."

"These worlds were ruined by Sith sabotage. It wasn't your fault."

The shaper didn't seem convinced. She looked over the railing, down at the distant forest. "Fault or innocence is irrelevant. The failure of the Ossus project was a stain against my people and the *Jeedai*. And my friend, Kol Skywalker. The honor of us all needs to be restored."

Kol Skywalker was dead; so were the Jedi, though Marin didn't dare say so in front of K'Kruhk.

The old Whiphid, at least, seemed to agree with Nei Rin. "For many years, Master Shaper, you've been the most honorable being I've known. One day the whole galaxy will recognize the good you've done."

She shifted uncomfortably. "You speak flattery."

"I speak hope," said K'Kruhk.

Nei Rin thought on that, then retreated from the carriage's edge and spoke with the other Yuuzhan Vong as they steered the flyer back to its place of origin. As they dropped altitude Marin remained beside K'Kruhk, watching the expanse of rich green forest pass them by.

Eventually she asked, "How many teams are still out looking?"

K'Kruhk understood her meaning. "Right now, seven. Plus Khat Lah, pursuing his own leads. Sometimes there are more, sometimes less. The galaxy is vast and there are always things worth investigating."

And there would always be ex-Jedi desperate to regain the Force, at least until time and age claimed them. Marin, along with Ania on *Free Agent* and Cade on *Mynock*, had been active in the search for the first two years. Gradually, as possibilities and enthusiasms waned, they'd started taking other work.

"If there's anything special you want me to look into, let me know," Marin told him. "I'll talk to Ania soon. She should be able to give me a lift to anywhere."

"Thank you, Marin. I'll keep that in mind."

She was in a different position from all those Force-deaf Jedi. As a descendant of Anakin Skywalker, she still had the ability to hear and command the universe's primal power. After laying down her older battles she'd sought not the recovery of the Force but a deeper connection to it; Cade Skywalker's experiences on Rohakalla and beyond its gate had revealed things about the power she'd never understood. Marin was getting old; the dramas that had consumed her life seemed behind her and deeper mysteries beckoned in a way they never had when she'd been young, ambitious and practical-minded.

But after years of searching they'd found no hint of any other Tho Yor, no signs of any ancient ascended worlds that might open the Force to others. Creeping disappointment could be the most crushing kind.

As the shapers' settlement and the broad wooden landing platform came in sight, Marin reminded herself that wasn't so. The glider slowed and dropped over the platform. The crew tossed mooring cables down from the carriage and a dozen beings below grabbed hold of the cables and attached them to the platform's winches. As they were drawn in closer, Marin

could clearly make out five of them as Yuuzhan Vong shapers. The last was a human young woman.

K'Kruhk spotted her too. The Whiphid asked, "Has the empress expressed any interest in helping the search?"

"She's not the empress anymore," Marin said, eyeing Marasiah's small figure as it grabbed a cable in both hands. "I don't think she ever will be again."

"Just so," K'Kruhk admitted. "Have you asked her?"

"I've suggested. She rejected. Frankly, I don't think she has much love for the Force anymore. It didn't help her when she needed it the most."

"So she is content to stay here and help Nei Rin."

"I don't think *content* is the word. But I don't see anyplace else for her to be."

K'Kruhk made a low humming sound but said nothing more. After the crew below secured the glider to the platform, they reeled it in until the bottom of the carriage gently ground against the wood. Nei Rin and her shapers disembarked first, followed by Marin and K'Kruhk.

Marasiah Fel stood on the platform's edge, watching the others with dispassion. Three years ago she'd been the most recognizable woman in the galaxy, but so much had changed. Gone were the regal robes, exchanged for a loose brown tunic woven from Yuuzhan Vong plantlife. Gone were the thin golden crown and the legions of scarlet-armored Knights. Gone was the streak of dyed white in her hair, symbol of the Fel monarchs since Jagged a hundred years back. Now thick brown fell in messy curtains to her shoulders, half-hiding her face.

K'Kruhk didn't hesitate to approach her. "You've been doing great work here," he told her. "You should be proud. One day the whole galaxy will know about it."

"Perhaps," Marasiah said. "There's still much to do."

"Indeed. But it is good work."

She took the compliment with a tiny nod. "Do you plan to stay on Milagro long?"

"A local day, maybe two. There are things I must attend to."

"Of course."

Stiff silence lingered between them. Marin noticed how they avoided calling each other by either name or title. Nothing seemed to fit for the former empress and former grand master.

K’Kruhk gestured one clawed hand to Marin. “I understand you’ve been having mediation sessions with your aunt.”

Marasiah’s eyes flicked to the older woman, then back to K’Kruhk. “Yes. They’ve been... helpful.”

“I’m glad.” Another silence. He ventured, “Do you plan to continue working on Milagro?”

“Do I have somewhere else to be?”

Her voice was quiet but bitter. There were certainly things Marasiah *could* be doing, namely joining the resistance movement and taking the fight to her uncle. Yet the woman had resisted any urging. During their mediation sessions, it was clear to Marin why.

“Perhaps,” K’Kruhk said, “you could help on other reclamation projects. Nei Rin says her shapers are at work on several more worlds.”

“I’ve thought about that.” Marasiah looked away, toward the forests that ringed the settlement. “But for now, I’ll stay here.”

“I see. You must choose your own path, of course.”

Marasiah stiffened. “Yes. I know. Thank you for coming.”

Without another word she turned and walked toward the stairway that climbed down the platform to the ground. K’Kruhk watched her go, and once her brown head had disappeared from sight the Whiphid released a big, long sigh.

“You see what I mean now?” asked Marin.

“I believe I do.”

They stared at the empty staircase for a moment, then turned as one back to Nei Rin and her shapers, seeking solace in the fact that some problems did have solutions.

Marasiah walked swiftly down the stairs, and once her feet hit dirt she kept walking, away from the platform to where settlement ended and forest began. Only then did she feel like she was no longer hounded.

Staring into the woods, Marasiah breathed deep, clenched and unclenched her fists, and finally let tension escape her body. She’d been raised a princess and knew her behavior toward K’Kruhk had been bad form, to say the least. She felt a little shame for that; mostly she was glad to be alone. The ancient Jedi had been an unwelcome intrusion from the outer world.

On Milagro, working in secret with Nei Rin and her shapers,

Marasiah had found some solace. She was doing good work here, righting wrongs the Sith had inflicted on the galaxy more successfully than she ever had as empress. That satisfied the part of her that was raised-royal, the part that had been taught that everything she did should in some way serve the greater good.

Mostly, though, it was Milagro's unique isolation that helped her. She could feel the forest in the Force and sense the strange ebbs and flows of untamed nature, but Nei Rin and the other shapers were blanks to her. Most of the time the Force told her she was the only sentient on Milagro, and that was a comfort. Sometimes Khat Lah's Yuuzhan Vong, Force-awakened and very different from Nei Rin's, would stop by, but only briefly. Sometimes Ania Solo would bring supplies, but she never stayed long. Sometimes Marin would remain longer, and while Marasiah sometimes resented her intrusion, the older woman had proven a valuable teacher. In the difficult early months, when Marasiah had felt torn apart by regret and anger over all that had happened, Marin had taught her how to empty her emotions and find peace through inner stillness. She'd also taught Marasiah how to push back the Force, unlearning all the childhood teachings that made her call on its power by instinct. Many days went by when Marasiah didn't consciously touch it at all.

K'Kruhk disturbed all that. He blazed clearly in the Force, no longer powerful with it but alive and stalwart. Despite the practical dissolution of the Jedi Order, he still emanated the righteous faith he always had. The past few years had changed many things, but not who K'Kruhk was at his core.

Marasiah hated that. She felt mocked and insulted by the old Jedi's inner strength. It reminded her of what she should have been. Worse, it prodded her with the knowledge that, while she worked and mediated and emptied herself in seclusion, galactic history continued to flow. Hogrum Chalk, the uncle she'd loved, the man who'd killed her father and betrayed her and manipulated and murdered thousands, still reigned on Coruscant. The resistance against him was weak and lacked larger support. To Marasiah's surprise and shame, her uncle had proven more adept at keeping the Federation together than she had. Where Marasiah had tried to rule with justice and

honestly, Hogrum commanded trickery and lies. Yet he was serving the greater good where she had failed.

During one of their early mediation sessions, Marin had pointed out that for her entire life, Marasiah had been defined by what she was: first princess, then empress. Who she was, the person beneath the crown, had barely been a concern.

After three years, Marasiah still didn't know who that person was. When she mediated, first with Marin but more often alone, she was no longer split between light and dark. Rather there was darkness- all her hatred for her uncle, which still needed only a small spark to flare- and there was a void. When Marasiah emptied herself of anger for what her life had become she found only emptiness. There was no hope for the future, no expectations for a better tomorrow, no passions to be roused. There were only glimmers of light and regret.

Most of the time Marasiah didn't mind that. As long as she kept the anger at bay, she could remain calm and empty. Then K'Kruhk or something else would intrude, breaking the peace of the void.

Her Knight's training was not a total waste. Standing on the forest's edge, Marasiah cycled through controlled breathing and emptied her mind of distractions. With efforts she pushed away memory of K'Kruhk and his distant Force-aura. She focused on the trees, the dappled sunlight and layered shadow. Life in its natural state, without desire of anger or regret, far from the cruelty of history. By focusing on those things she could push away everything else and she found the calm she needed.

K'Kruhk was far away and so was her aunt. Marasiah felt alone and empty and was satisfied. She wished this feeling could last forever, because for her, emptiness was the only peace.





## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

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The hangar on the outpost world Seline was a shabby thing, cold and gray, metal walls stained with rust and dusty with neglect. It was a sad place for *Jabitha* to die in. Though the organic Sekotan flyer's hull still retained its smooth texture and forest-green color, its iridescence seemed to fade before Anakin's eyes as he sat on a bench before the ship, chin in his hands. Outside, winds howled and spicules of ice shattered with a harsh, tinny rattle against the hangar's thin metal skin.

He tried to make sense of all that had gone before. Together with his master Obi-Wan, the twelve-year-old apprentice had been dispatched to the mysterious Outer Rim planet of Zonama Sekot. Their mission has been twofold: to investigate claims of an attack by raiders of unknown origin, and to locate the missing Jedi Vergere, who'd apparently been on the planet at the time.

They'd arrived posing as buyers looking to purchase one of Zonama Sekot's unique organic starships. It was the only reason why outsiders ever came to that world. What they'd found was a mystery deeper even than the two they'd been meant to investigate. The planet itself, they'd discovered, was alive in a way that was totally different from any other world they'd known. Its rich forests and plains, its varied plants and animals and the sentient Ferroan settlers, all combined to create a super-arching consciousness. In Ferroan, *zonama* meant body and *sekot* meant mind, and that was exactly what the planet was: a form and essence combined to create a singular conscious, so powerful in the Force it would deceive even Obi-Wan with its illusions.

In the end, Zonama Sekot had chosen, of its singular will, to escape the known galaxy. Firing massive hyperdrives constructed with funds from its starship sales, the living planet had rocketed to lightspeed, leaving behind the Jedi and the *Jabitha*. The living ship was their sole proof the strange experiences on the planet had been real and not a dream, but now *Jabitha* was dying, like a fledging bird starving without its parent.

Anakin didn't understand much of what had happened on Zonama Sekot. He only knew that this beautiful, strange ship dying was *unfair*. He tried to imagine *Jabitha* back in her birthplace of warmth and lush tropical beauty, back with her family . . . wherever they might be.

Seline was a sad place for a life to end.

He heard the sound of the hangar's primitive hinge-mounted door swinging open, then clanging shut. Anakin turned on the bench to see two familiar forms, half-buried beneath cold-weather gear. The taller was Obi-Wan, his Master, his mentor, perhaps his friend. After Qui-Gon's death on Naboo, Obi-Wan had taken over Anakin's training. Even then the boy had sensed Obi-Wan didn't really want to do it; he was fulfilling an obligation to his dead Master. Yet over the past three years, a kind of trust had developed between them. More than once, Obi-Wan had protected Anakin before the Jedi Council, defending transgressions even when they didn't deserve it.

The second figure was almost a full meter shorter than Obi-Wan, closer to Anakin's height. The tiny old woman had a gentle smile on her face that reminded Anakin of Qui-Gon's, or his mother. He didn't know Thracia Cho Leem well, but he'd instantly liked the old Jedi, Vergere's Master.

He looked back at *Jabitha* as Thracia approached his bench. "Not so young now, Anakin Skywalker?" she asked, sitting down beside him.

Anakin slid over a few centimeters to make room for her but did not answer. When they'd last talked she'd admonished him to embrace childhood because it wouldn't last. Anakin hadn't realized how short-lived it really was. He wasn't losing a friend in *Jabitha* exactly; he felt like he was losing someone who should have been a friend but never could be, which was a new kind of hurt.

Thracia put a hand on his back. "Young Jedi, you have learned some hard truths. Power and even discipline are not sufficient. Self-knowledge is the most difficult of our many journeys."

"I know," Anakin said softly. He'd need both those things if he was ever to fulfill his destiny. Whatever that destiny was.

"And sometimes," she whispered, "Wisdom seems impossibly far away."

The boy nodded.

"You must let me feel what is within you now," Thracia said gently. Then, with the faintest tone of warning: "You are still being judged."

Anakin screwed up his face, but acquiesced. He felt Thracia touch his mind with hers, felt her experience what he'd experienced on Zonama Sekot and learn what he'd learned. He felt her puzzle on the same things that puzzled him. It always made him feel better to know he was not alone on this strange road.

But there were some things he did not want to share. During the climax of their mission Anakin had been attacked by a Blood Carver assassin meant to kill him. For a moment he'd sensed the Blood Carver in the Force, known him and understood him and even pitied him. And then, without a weapon in hand, Anakin had killed the Blood Carver. He'd crushed the alien with his mind.

"It just... happened," Anakin whimpered. "He was coming at me... and I just... I overflowed."

He'd felt like that before sometimes. There was this thing inside him, maybe what Qui-Gon had called his destiny. It was like a great well and he knew that he, Anakin Skywalker, Shmi's son and Obi-Wan's apprentice, was just a mouth of the well, the opening that plunged into depths not his own. He'd always been scared of what might lie beneath; now, after killing the Blood Carver, he was terrified. How could he bring balance to the Force if he couldn't bring balance to himself?

It took effort not to cry. Obi-Wan sat down on his other flank. Without touching the boy he said, "You did a terrible thing, Anakin, but you did it to save yourself, and the magister's daughter. I dare say it was the right thing."

Right *and* terrible? It shouldn't be so. "But the dark side..."

“Is something you must guard very carefully against. And I’ll do it any way I can, Anakin.”

He said it with concern and devotion, and maybe something like love, but the look in his eyes was different from what he’d seen in his mother’s or Qui-Gon’s. Anakin missed them both.

Thracia said, “You made contact with Vergere there. That is a good thing.”

She was steering the conversation to a new place. Good. “We didn’t make contact... We just got her message.”

“She said she’d gone away with the invaders- the Far Outsiders,” Obi-Wan elaborated. “She made quite interesting claims. One, that all their spacecraft and technology was purely organic. They even seem to regard ours as blasphemous. Two, that neither the Far Outsiders nor their biomachines could be felt in the Force.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Anakin said. He’d been mulling over that mystery to distract himself from his grief. “The Force is all life. It’s *everything*. How can something be alive but not be in the Force?”

He looked between the two adults, desperate for answers. Neither had any to give. Thracia asked, “How can an entire planet be alive in the Force? How could so many individual minds also be collectively joined to create a cumulative- but apparently separate- being? I’ve never heard of such a thing, and-” she gave a gentle chuckle, “I have studied the Force for longer than you two have been alive.”

“I feel like nothing was resolved,” Obi-Wan admitted. “We didn’t find Vergere. We didn’t learn the truth of the Far Outsiders. And Zonama Sekot... I feel like we’ve only stumbled on mysteries but no clue how to solve them.”

“I’m less concerned with solving than understanding,” said Thracia. “The Force is the sum of all life. That is the credo of all us Jedi. Clearly, the Force is more various than even we have imagined.” Her smile went wistful. “I can understand why Vergere went off with the Far Outsiders. She always believed that the Jedi’s understanding of the Force was incomplete. She was certain there was more to be uncovered, somewhere, if one looked long enough...”

“I liked Vergere,” Anakin said softly. He’d only met the avian Jedi a few times, but she’d never been afraid of him and

she'd never treated him like a child. That was rare; it had been nice.

"Perhaps," Thracia said, "this is just the start of something. I hope the day comes when we can reconcile the Far Outsiders and Zonama Sekot with what we Jedi believe about the Force. I think, if it comes, we Jedi will all be richer for it." She reached out and ran her fingers through Anakin's hair. "But that may be a long time yet. We may not even live to see it. So I suggest you try and put all this beyond you and grow in your own way."

Anakin looked regretfully at *Jabitha*. He could feel the ship in the Force still, very faintly. It would be nothing soon. "It's hard," he whispered.

"I know. There will be many more battles for you, Apprentice, many more disappointments. And many more joys."

"More joy than sadness, I hope," Obi-Wan said.

Thracia nodded ambiguously and stroked Anakin's face. The boy stared at the dying ship and thought about the mysteries within and the mysteries without.

For him there was no balance. No balance yet.



## PART II



WORLDS ENOUGH AND TIME





## Chapter Eleven

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Given the trap Kyra's rebels had barely escaped from and his role in leading them there, Jao felt *Free Agent* had no right to sit on *Paramount's* flight deck, let alone appropriate its supplies. After taking a little bit of fuel, they began prepping the freighter for the flight to Druckenwell, where they'd pay for repairs on the rest of the ship.

Once they made their departure plans clear to *Paramount's* deck crew, Jao nursed the hope that Kyra would stop by to give them farewell. Though she didn't say it, he knew Ania hoped too. That short dinner in *Free Agent's* galley had been pleasant enough, but nobody pretended they'd turned back time. The course Kyra was on now was different from Ania's and Jao's; Kyra didn't seem happy about it, but she'd set herself on it with grim resolution.

Nonetheless, Jao hoped for a goodbye at least. While Ania and AG-37 were in the cockpit running pre-flight systems checks, he circled the ship's outside, giving one last visual survey. His back was turned to the hangar door when he heard it hiss open and he immediately turned to face it, daring to hope. But instead of Kyra a blue-skinned Chagrian woman, Senator Derrol's widow Saara, walked toward him. Jao tried to hide his disappointment.

"I understand you're about to take off," Saara said.

"For Druckenwell," Jao nodded. "We were headed there before, well, before we changed course."

"And then where will you go? Coruscant?"

He fought a sigh; he knew the rebel leaders didn't approve of his plan to contact Yalta Val but he'd never thought they'd

hound him like this. “*Free Agent* is too familiar there,” he said, “So I’ll probably have to buy a small ship at Druckenwell. I should have just enough credits for that. After that, I intend to head to Coruscant.”

He said it firmly, daring her to object. Instead she asked, “How will you make contact with Val once you arrive?”

“The same way I did the first time. Short text-based messages on a private frequency we’ve used. From there, we’ll arrange a face-to-face.”

“Do you think Chalk’s found your private freq?”

“It’s possible,” Jao admitted, “But our messages will still be encoded. And cryptic.”

“You’re putting yourself in terrible danger. Is it all because of loyalty to your old teacher?”

“In the Imperial Knights, we said that a teacher never stops being a teacher, just like a student never stops being a student.”

She regarded him without arguing. This conversation wasn’t going as he’d expected; it veered even further when she said, “There’s no need for you to buy a ship at Druckenwell.”

He blinked. “There’s not?”

“No. I think you can get into Coruscant the same way you did on your last visit.”

“Last time I infiltrated on one of *your* ships.”

Saarai stared at him until he got it.

“Wait, hold on a minute,” Jao waved a hand. “What’s with the sudden reversal?”

“It’s more an addendum. We’ll be sending personnel to Coruscant on other business, using a shuttle set up with a dozen false transponder codes. If you’re determined to talk to Val, we can at least make sure you have a safe ride inbound.”

Her tone was polite, controlled, formal; despite that, Jao thought he saw a little amusement in that blue face. “What kind of business on Coruscant?”

“Confidential.”

“Of course. What personnel?”

“Me,” she said simply.

Jao kept staring. Since Porat Derrol’s death, Saara had assumed a leadership role in the resistance, filling his void with surprising ease. Despite her youth and apparent lack of experience, she had a poise that commanded respect and a skill

at managing difficult personnel. Jao realized he was receiving the latter right now.

“So you want to go with me. To Coruscant.”

“That’s correct.”

“Tell me that shuttle’s going to be able to take us out when you’re done.”

“If everything goes according to plan, I’ll slip in, do my business, and get out without drawing attention.” She cocked her head. “Can you say the same?”

Jao couldn’t, not really. He had to look Val in the eye and gauge if he really was a traitor. He desperately hoped that wouldn’t be the case, and he admitted that his judgment might be clouded. And if he *wasn’t* a traitor, Jao would have to convince him to flee Coruscant, another difficult task.

“If Master Val was set up,” he said, “I want to try and extract him.”

“And if you decide your old teacher has betrayed you?”

Jao swallowed. He knew what he’d have to do then, and it would be far harder than sneaking away with an extra passenger. In truth, he didn’t know if he could do it.

The dilemma was plain on his face. Saaraï said, “It won’t just be you and me on that trip. There will be a few extra beings to watch your back... and make sure you do what has to be done, either way.”

They were right not to trust him, after the trap he’d walked them into. Jao burned with shame to admit it; he also knew that having a team of rebel operatives watching his back would make his mission safer.

It wasn’t really an offer he could refuse.

“When do you plan on leaving?” he asked.

“We’re putting the team together now,” said Saaraï. “It won’t be for at least six hours.”

“Okay, then.” Jao looked at *Free Agent*. “I’m going to have to tell some people about my change of plans.”

Saaraï simply nodded, like she understood how tricky that would be. She didn’t know the half of it.

When Jao made his way to *Free Agent*’s cockpit, Ania and AG-37 both watched his entrance: one with a twist of the neck, the other by turning the upper half of his conical head while the rest of him faced firmly forward.

"We're about ready to get going here," Ania said. "Everything look good outside?"

Jao exhaled. "I think I've got a change of plans."

"The singular pronoun is noted," AG-37 said. "What has changed for you?"

Succinctly, he'd told them about the offer he'd just been given and added that he didn't feel he could refuse it. Depending on how his talk with Val went, they might need the armed help Saarai offered, and the shuttle they'd use to infiltrate Coruscant was designed for covert ops.

"And it would be a lot cheaper than buying my own ride," Jao added at the end, like that really mattered.

He couldn't read anything in AG-37's metal mien, but he watched Ania's expression soften in concern, then get firm again. "Well," she said, angling the co-pilot chair so she faced him directly, "I guess that settles things."

"I think it does." Weakly he'd hoped that if Saarai could change her mind on the operation, so could Ania. Apparently not. "She says they won't depart for at least six hours. That'll give me time to move some things out of *Free Agent*. Not all my stuff, obviously, but just enough for the mission."

"Right," said Ania. "I'd better get packing too."

Or maybe he'd misread things again. "Wait, do you think you're coming with me?"

"Did you plan on stopping me?"

"No. But Ania..." He tried to figure out the best way to tell her that this mission was stupid and dangerous and he didn't want her getting hurt because of him. Instead he said, "What about *Free Agent*? What about Druckenwell?"

"Easy. A-gee can take her there and get repairs done."

"And you're okay with that?" Jao asked the droid. Saying he was protective of Ania was an understatement.

AG-37's lower photoreceptor pulsed, showing cogitation. "I am fully capable of commissioning repair work to *Free Agent* myself, as I am the rightful documented owner of this vessel. Even if organics refuse to believe it at first."

"But what about... you know.... This is going to be a dangerous situation."

"Dangerous *and* stupid," Ania said. "Which is why you need me along."

“Ania-”

“I’m serious. We all know *I’m* the one who can get away doing rash, crazy stuff without thinking through all the consequences.” She jabbed a thumb at her chest. “I’ve seen you try it before Jao, and you just can’t pull it off. Like that time you ran off with Skywalker. How’d that end up? And that time you ‘apprenticed’ yourself to Darth Wredd, who had to bail you out then? No, if you’re going to do something stupid and dangerous you might as well bring somebody with a proven track record of success.”

It was one of those Ania-arguments he’d never learned how to counter. “Saarai’s already bringing a commando team. *They’ll* watch over me.” And shoot Master Val if he’d turned traitor, he thought grimly.

“Sometimes even backups need backups.” She crossed her arms and put on a sly smile. “Hate to break it to you, Jao, but you’re stuck with me.”

Jao looked at AG-37. “You’re okay with this?”

“I am less than pleased,” the droid admitted. “We cannot keep *Free Agent* with the rebel fleet and we cannot take it to the capital. Someone must command the ship and oversee repairs. Once I would have left that to Sauk and joined Ania on Coruscant. However, as he is unavailable, the task must fall to me.”

“The concern is touching as always, A-gee, but I’ve got this one,” Ania told the droid, but her eyes were on Jao.

He acquiesced, “I guess that means I’ve got you, then.”

“Always.” Ania smirked, but her eyes were serious.

Despite his protestations and the danger waiting on Coruscant, Jao found himself buoyed. She was right, after all; his fortunes fared far better when he had Ania at his side. He liked to think that held true in reverse, and wordlessly promised that on Coruscant, at least, it would.

There’d been a time when Gunner Yage dreaded nothing more than a simple meal with her father. It was strange how things changed.

The setting was more questionable than the company tonight. She’d have preferred a meal at his penthouse near naval headquarters, but instead he’d insisted they dine out. The

Naboo Queen was one of those restaurants that military officers, bankers, businessbeings, and senators all found appropriately classy. The view of Galactic City was grand, especially at night, when the skyline glowed and speeder-traffic traced pulsing light-lines into elegant geometries.

Gunner wasn't a fan. The place was several flavors of snob-bishness stewed together to create a confection of unparallel pretension. Her father insisted that a rising officer needed to act and eat like one, and thus she was here. He had a fair point, but she found herself wondering what dive Rimmon, Coburn, and the other Skulls were enjoying themselves at right now.

"Given the clandestine nature of the Praxal VII mission," her father said, "There won't be any official commendations. But the regent's assured me that your pilots will all receive glowing marks on their records."

That hadn't been Gunner's first covert op, and she knew how it worked. She'd already penned and signed appropriately vague letters to the families of her pilots who'd died at Praxal VII. That was one duty she wouldn't miss if she ever got a ship to captain.

"From what I've heard, we'll be on duty here for the foreseeable future," Gunner said after swallowed a mouthful of noodles in a salty Esseles broth. "I haven't heard anything about new operations against the rebels."

Rulf Yage was an admiral, she a mere captain, and she wasn't expecting him to spill things beyond her pay grade. After a mouthful of wine he said, "There's no offensives planned. These rebels, they barely deserve the name. According to the regent's estimates, they only have less than twenty capital ships in their entire force, none of which is fit to take on a star destroyer head-to-head."

Gunner had noted that, despite being chief of the whole government. Chalk hadn't relinquished any of his former assets as spymaster. "If the regent went to all that trouble to bait them, he must still consider them a threat."

"I'm not sure if it's them, or just one in particular."

Gunner learned closer. Every once in a while, her father let gossip slip. He'd never done that when she was younger. "I've heard talk about the rebels having a Jedi with them... Like we have one, too."

“There are no Jedi anymore,” Rulf said. “No Force.”

It was the official line. Gunner knew it wasn't true; her half-brother Cade still had it, wherever he was. She hadn't had contact with the man since their mother died. Cade was a slimy scumbag and after their first encounter she'd never wanted to see his face again. Now, though, she found herself wondering what he was up to. He hadn't made the news in a long time but she was sure he was out there; her gut said the whole galaxy would feel it if he died.

“We know Chalk has his guy,” Gunner said softly. “I know they won't acknowledge it publicly, but they say he's just a kid... and he can use the Force with the best of them. And they also say the rebels have a girl who can use it too. I don't know how that's possible, unless there's Skywalkers nobody accounted for.”

“Honestly, Gunner, I don't know,” her father said, and from the faint exasperation in his voice she believed him. “Marasiah was her father's child. She was more... open with her admirals. Chalk is a spymaster by training. He keeps secrets very close.” As though hearing his tone, Rulf corrected, “As is his right, of course. He's done an excellent job preventing a major attack by those terrorists.”

“Except for the one here.” She waved a hand at the Galactic City skyline.

“Well. That some time ago.”

It was, and the three years since had been largely peaceful. There were still plenty of partisan flare-ups in the senate, but most citizens in the Federation didn't even know there were still rebels out there who needed fighting. It made Gunner feel unappreciated, but at the same time she was glad the galaxy was, essentially, at peace.

She ate another mouthful of noodles and looked around the restaurant. Sometimes peace was fleeting, or outright illusory. She remembered a time she and her father had dined at the Naboo Queen, years ago, when it had seemed like Darth Krayt had the whole galaxy in his iron grip. That time the unhappy meal had gotten an even more unhappy crasher: Rulf's ex-wife and her mother.

When she was alive, Gunner had wanted nothing to do with the woman. She'd been a self-serving, ruthless rancor who

chewed people up and spat them back up, relentless in her vain drive for power. She was the kind of moff who gave Imperials a bad name, Gunner had thought.

That wasn't wrong, but there'd been more to Nyna Calixte. There'd been Morrigan Corde too, short-term wife of a Jedi, mostly-absent mother to Cade. No one had realized the depths of her convoluted schemes until the end, when she'd been out-schemed herself by Maladi and died with the Sith poisoner on Te Hasa.

Corde or Calixte, whatever you called her, had never been a good woman. Gunner couldn't say she'd ever loved her, and her being gone made memory no fonder. But, irrational as it was, she missed her.

"You look lost," Rulf commented, jarring her attention back to him.

"Sorry," she muttered, then admitted, "I was thinking of Mom."

Rulf chewed another mouthful, swallowed. Quietly he said, "She did accost us here once, didn't she?"

"I thought you'd remember."

They ate, chewed, swallowed, drank. Gunner asked, "If anyone could get to the truth of what's going it would be her, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "She probably could."

"Well. I guess we'll have to muddle through on our own, won't we?"

"I imagine so." Rulf put his fork down and looked firmly at her. "This is a galaxy at *peace*, Gunner. This is the kind of unity and order it hasn't known in a long time. It's precarious, yes, but unity and order must be protected."

"I know. And I'm not going to go poking around or meddling where I shouldn't. I'm your daughter, not hers."

Rulf blinked, as though taken by surprise. Then he looked back to his plate and resumed eating.

It was true, metaphorically. Gunner was the soldier he'd raised her to be; her mother had just been a passing annoyance. But blood was truth do, and she did have some Morrigan Corde in her. She'd seen Cade Skywalker struggle to deny his inheritance, but in the end he seemed to have accepted what his mother had left for him.



Gunner wished him honest good luck with that, and hoped it was a path she'd never have to follow.

Hogrum Chalk didn't need the Force to see that Eli Horn was flushed with shame. The young man stood in the center of the empty circular chamber, located atop one of the spires of the government palace. Coruscant's nighttime lights drifted silently around them but Eli paid them no heed; his attention was firmly on the man in front of him, as Hogrum's was on him.

When they'd made their pact three years ago, Hogrum had agreed to help Eli in his quest to eradicate the last traces of the Force from the galaxy and ensure it could never be recovered. Eli had, in turn, agreed to help secure Hogrum's rule, while at the same time insisting he wouldn't be the regent's enforcer.

Despite that pledge, Eli had had no qualms about going to Praxal VII to ensure the trap against the rebels. He'd gone for the simple fact that his Force-using counterpart, the girl Kyra, was expected to be among them. It wasn't their first encounter but it should have been the last. Because it wasn't, Eli was acting as though Praxal VII had been a total failure.

"There was more to the mission than capturing the girl," Hogrum reminded.

"We didn't capture anyone. As mission leader, I'm responsible for that."

"I'm glad you accept responsibility, but the mission was not the disaster you think it was. It still cost them personnel and resources. They gained nothing."

"Neither did we."

Secretly, Hogrum was pleased by that *we*. In the beginning Eli had been solely focused on his quest to silence the Force. Once it became Kyra was active with the rebels, he'd shown no qualms in entrenching himself with Hogrum's special forces. There were clearly personal motivations there, a rivalry or enmity with the girl; for all his ardor and lofty ideals, Eli was still young.

"Consider the mission a draw, save one point." Hogrum held up one finger. "When disseminating information, I made sure each suspected informant received a different location as Stazi's prison. One got Praxal VII, another Rendalla, another Saleucami, and so forth."

“So you’ve pinpointed an intelligence leak.”

“Yes.” Hogrum lowered his hand. “A high-ranking one at that. You’ve heard of Yalta Val?”

Eli was familiar with the name. “An Imperial Knight.”

“I’d have never thought he was suspect, but you told me about the girl Kyra and her allies.”

Eli frowned. “You mean Skywalker? Or Ania Solo?”

“The latter. Specifically, Yalta Val’s former apprentice, Jao Assam.”

The young man nodded. “He was searching for the Force with her.”

“Yes. He abandoned his vows as a Jedi to chase the Solo woman across the galaxy. Whether his reasons were idealistic or more, mmm, primal, Assam showed a dangerous independent streak. And Master Val, unfortunately, tolerated it. Perhaps encouraged it.”

“Then we should apprehend him.” Eli slipped a hand to the lightsaber at his belt. At the start of this he’d vowed never to use such a weapon again; another promise he’d backslided on. Hogrum wondered how much that grated Eli.

“Val isn’t some skulking spy or bribed mid-level bureaucrat. He’s one of the most senior Knights in the organization.”

“So you’re *not* arresting him?”

“It would raise difficult questions,” Hogrum said, which was an understatement.

Most Knights accepted the lie that their veteran leader Treis Sinde had been killed in the staged attack on Coruscant. Still, Azlyn Rae was unaccounted for. Some sources placed Ganner Krieg as working with the rebels. Those two knew the truth, that Marasiah Fel had been removed by coup rather than killed in a terrorist bombing. Hogrum didn’t think that rumor had spread widely among the Knights, but with proof of Val’s treason he couldn’t be sure. If he did arrest Val, it would unsettle the other Knights, and even without the Force they could be a danger. It was why he’d kept them on Coruscant whenever possible, mostly for ceremonial or security jobs.

Eli asked, “Do you think they rebels will try to make contact with Val after this?”

“They’d be foolish to. But that doesn’t mean they won’t. I’ll have him watched.”

Eli nodded. "Have there been any new sightings of Cade Skywalker's ship?"

"Unfortunately, no," Hogrum admitted. "Nor Ania Solo's."

Both ragged freighters had performed smash-and-grab rescue operations on Coruscant; the first stealing Marasiah Fel, the latter an older, seemingly Force-empowered woman whom Hogrum suspected was Roan Fel's long-lost first cousin. Despite having a wealth of eyes across the Federation, the galaxy was a huge place, and there were endless spots Skywalker and Solo could hide as they plotted to make trouble.

Quietly, his most trusted spies were looking for them. They were also looking for Marasiah.

He knew with certainty that Marasiah had been aboard the warship *Alliance* when Admiral Fenel's fleet had besieged and destroyed it. He knew that, mid-battle, the tracker he'd had surgically implanted inside his niece had stopped transmitting. He knew that a handful of ships had escaped *Alliance* and slipped through the siege grid, and that those survivors formed the backbone of the rebel movement that currently nagged his Federation. If Marasiah Fel had survived that battle she'd have surely joined the rebels, spoken on their behalf, revealed Hogrum's elaborate deception and toppled the lies on which he'd constructed the new galactic peace.

But none of that had happened. Any other man would have trusted she was dead, but Hogrum could not. In his position, paranoia was not a flaw but a necessity of survival.

There's been no sign of Marasiah, Marin, Cade, or Ania, but he'd keep searching, relentlessly, as long as his reign endured.

Eli shifted on his feet, restless. "What should I do now, sir?"

"Stay on Coruscant. Use the archives and my intelligence database. Search for more leads the Jedi might be tracking."

Eli nodded, eager to get back to his hunt. The young man had his own flavor of paranoia.

"If I get any information about the location of the rebels, or of Kyra," Hogrum added, "I'll let you know."

The young man nodded again and on Hogrum's permission left the chamber. He watched Eli go, then turned eyes to the spread of Coruscant night through the window. In a way, he thought, it was appropriate fate had drawn Eli and him together. Both men had set themselves on an impossible task. Eli's

enemy was the Force; Hogrum's the chaos that had ravaged the galaxy for much of his life. Neither could drop his guard; theirs were fights that could consume an entire life.

They'd already made sacrifices. Sometimes, when he dared, Hogrum thought about Marasiah. She'd reminded him so much of his sister Elliah; brave and noble, without the short-sightedness or ego that had twisted Roan Fel into a man worthy of spite. Yet Marasiah had been so focused on *not* being her father that she'd fallen into a new set of errors, and had stood ready to let Alliance seditionists and their Sith allies tear the Federation apart rather than leave the moral high ground.

He would have been much happier if Marasiah had stayed in her isolated prison for months and years, unhappy but alive. Hogrum Chalk had the blood of thousands on his hands; that was the only stain that bothered him.

But sacrifices had to be made for galactic peace. If Marasiah *was* alive, it might satisfy his sliver of conscience, but it would topple the order he'd built. For that reason he hoped she was, indeed, dead. Better to be a murderer, Chalk thought, than a man who'd unleashed chaos on the galaxy.

That was something else he and Eli shared.

## Chapter Twelve

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During the ride from Kiffex to Esseles, Cade tried to shake the feeling that he was carrying a critically ill patient to the hospital. He told himself that if the human replica droid Guri and her technicians could restore C-3PO from the wreck he'd been on Socorro, they'd have no problem putting the spark of life back in R2.

*Life.* That was how he thought of it. He couldn't help himself. When K'Kruhk had given him the little astromech he'd described the droid as a family heirloom and reliable partner. Cade had been slightly annoyed at the imposition but hadn't thought about it further. Over the years, R2-D2 had helped him in countless small ways and a few really big ones. He probably owed R2 his life several times over, and without even realizing it he'd come to think of the droid as a trusted member of his crew. Hells, in some ways he was more reliable than Syn or Blue. And he knew he'd miss R2 if he were gone.

So maybe he was taking a patient to the hospital, but at least they weren't in a rush. Organic bodies bled out, choked to death, hemorrhaged, or suffered brain damage. The droid stayed as he was, a set of old mechanical entrails encased in white and blue, strapped into *Mynock's* aft cargo bay. They were midway to Esseles before Cade finally decided to take a peek. He was unsurprised to find C-3PO standing over R2's body. The golden droid was no longer a jittering nervous wreck; he'd calmed enough to stay in one place, and when Cade came up from behind he didn't turn from R2.

"It'll be okay, Threepio," Cade sighed. "You said it yourself.

Guri's a wizard. If she can fix you, she can replace whatever's wrong with Artoo."

"I very much want to believe that, Master Cade. And... thank you, sir, for doing everything in your power to help Artoo."

"It's no problem. I owe him a lot."

"Indeed." C-3PO turned his photoreceptors back on his counterpart. "I apologize for making a scene back on Kiffex, sir. It seems the emergency triggered unfortunate subroutines in my cortical processor, creating a condition quite like hysteria."

This kind of self-awareness wasn't like him. "Don't worry about it. We all know you and Artoo go way, way back."

"Indeed." The droid paused thoughtfully, then said, "I admit I am still discomfited. There is a possibility that Guri will *not* be able to repair Artoo. In that case, I shall lose the only counterpart I've ever known. The mere prospect propels me toward... unwelcome reflection."

Cade admitted the room felt morbid. "Tell me about it," he muttered.

C-3PO took that as invitation. "I had always told myself that mortality is for organics. Provided our parts are properly maintained, we droids can be deactivated for a long time, then returned to full operation, as I myself have demonstrated. Even if our servomotors fail, our memories can be uploaded into a new body, guaranteeing us functional immortality. I always found comfort in that thought, even when my owners recklessly endangered my existence, and their own.

"But after I was, let us say, resurrected by Mistress Guri, I confess my view changed. Were it not for Mistress Kyra, I'd have stayed on Socorro, technically functioning but in no way my current self. To borrow organic terminology, I would have been alive, but I would not have been *me*, and in that view I would have been dead... forever."

Cade had no idea what to say. He simply stared until C-3PO said, "Even Artoo and I, who have been functional for so long, may not continue to function forever. One day we may simply stop. In the past I have tried to rationalize that prospect away... but I find it very hard to do so now."

C-3PO stared at R2's body in silence until Cade found his voice. "Every story's gotta end, Threepio. Even stars burn out."

"I was always aware of that, Master Cade. That is to say,

those facts were always incorporated into my core memory database. However, though I *knew* those facts, I cannot say I truly understood them.”

“Nobody does. And that’s okay. Listen, stop worrying. We’ll get to Esseles and Guri will fix ‘im up. And then you two can keep on having adventures and following us around.”

“I would like to think so, sir.”

“The way I figure it is, you two have been tagging after Skywalkers for how long?”

“Honestly, sir, even I’m not certain. Artoo would know the precise number of years.”

“But the point is, it’s been a damn long time. The way I figure it, as long as we’ve got Skywalkers kicking around the galaxy, they’re gonna need Artoo and Threepio tagging along, getting ‘em out of jams.”

“You... think so, sir? Truly?”

“Stang yeah. What, you think the Force gets the job done alone? Naw. We need your kind of help. And that’s why Artoo will be fine. He’s still got work to do.”

C-3PO stared at him for a long moment before replying, “Your assertion makes no logical sense. Despite that, I find your words... reassuring. Perhaps my cortical matrix now malfunctioning also.”

“Just relax, Threepio. When we get to Esseles we’ll get it all sorted out.”

He patted the droid on the shoulder and left him there. When Cade stepped into the hall beyond he found Deliah there, leaning against the wall, eying him with a sly smile.

“What?” he shrugged, embarrassed.

She stepped forward and squeezed his hand. “Playing shrink for a neurotic droid now? *Meeshku*, you still have talents I don’t know about.”

“Hell, I was saying it for him as much as me.”

“Got the job done. Now come on, Cade. We got hours to kill before we hit Esseles and there’s better ways to do it than pep-talking Threepio.”

She cocked a blue brow. He smiled back, understand, and let her lead him away, hand in hand. Mechanical companions were invaluable in their way, but there were things only flesh and blood could provide. He’d gotten that kind of comfort from

other beings in the past, but none of them gave it like Blue. She didn't just set him straight in body, but in heart and mind.

As she led him down the corridor, arm locked in arm, Cade reflected that he'd had far better companions than he deserved,

When Khat Lah told her that the Dai Bendu monastery was approached more safely by foot than by air, Talon knew they were in for a difficult trek.

Ando Prime was a planet still in the grips of an ice age. While settlements had been founded on the low-lying snowy plains and even on the cusps of some slowly-retreating glaciers, the wind-lashed and ice-covered peaks of the Andobi Mountains were particularly inhospitable. Nonetheless, they dropped their Sekotan flyer to a flat spot on the foothills. From the landing site, the march ahead looked forbidding enough. The jagged mountains rose high ahead of them, disappearing into the white blur of snow-filled clouds that perpetually crowded the highest peaks.

"Do you remember the way?" Talon asked Khat Lah. The Yuuzhan Vong had been to the monastery once, but many years ago.

Khat Lah stared at the peaks for a discomfiting moment before saying, "Yes. I remember. But first we must prepare."

Preparation came in layers. First, they donned masquers that clung to their faces like second skin. Talon's ooglith hurt to put on, like always. Then they attached a modified gnullith to their faces. The star-shaped device converted the carbon dioxide they breathed back to oxygen and would prevent hypoxia at high altitudes; Talon had gotten used to the oogliths but the sensation of the gnullith's feelers prying into her mouth was most unsettling. Finally, they wrapped themselves in heat-preserving jackets, trousers, and facemasks. By the time they were done Talon couldn't tell one Yuuzhan Vong from another, or even tell that they were Yuuzhan Vong. They looked more like white-wrapped mummies.

After preparation came the trek. At first it wasn't so bad. They were constantly on the move, and that fought back the biting cold. Khat Lah seemed to know where he was going, and he led them up and over the nearest ridges, working a steady ascent.



The higher they went the more difficult it became. Snow piled deeper, obscuring anything like a path, until they were trudging through drifts nearly hip-deep. The wind got increasingly fierce, and bursts of snowfall erased the entire world in curtains of white. Sometimes they had to simply stop and wait for the snow to clear before moving, even as it piled high around them. Overhead, strong gusts howled between peaks and Talon finally understood why they hadn't tried to fly to the monastery. They'd have been blinded and smashed into the rock for sure. The last time Khat Lah had come here he'd come alone, and she marveled that he'd survived the trip.

The journey was difficult, disorienting, and even painful. With all the marchers wrapped-up against the cold, Talon had no way of knowing if the others were having as hard a time as her. Perhaps they were drawing on the Force, giving each other comfort and even physical warmth. Perhaps she was the only one left out.

It was hard to think about, and probably true. The One Sith had offered her community of a kind. Sometimes Talon had found some belonging amidst Khat Lah's strange band, but right now she felt alienated, bitter, and angry.

She had no idea how long it took, but eventually they arrived at the monastery. A path of trodden snow winding up the final slope was lined by stone statues so ancient and wind-beaten she couldn't tell what they were meant to be. With renewed energy Talon climbed ahead, lagging behind only two others for the last ascent. When they got close she saw a portal carved into the mountainside, and dim lights flickering in the cave beyond. She also saw a single figure standing in their way. It was as wrapped-up as they, and she couldn't even guess the species.

The figure raised two hands, bringing Khat Lah and the others to a halt several meters away. The voice that spoke to them over the wind used no language Talon was familiar with.

In Basic, Khat Lah replied, "We are journeyers. We've come here seeking knowledge. Will the Dai Bendu grant us that?"

After a moment the wrapped-up figure replied in turn, with a voice that was high-pitched but strong. "What do you know of the Dai Bendu?" it asked in Basic.

"I know you seek the great center of things. So do we. In fact, I believe we have knowledge to share with you."

“You presume much.”

“Perhaps. If nothing else, we’ve come to return something that belongs to you.”

Khat Lah reached into his jacket and drew out the Tho Yor-shaped stone they’d acquired on Shumavar. Supposedly those items were considered valuable prayer icons by Andobi’s Bendu monks; if not, this whole venture would be an embarrassing waste.

But the monk seemed captivated by the stone. It reached out with two hands- a new set, Talon realized, making four total- took the stone, and examined it through the eye-slit of its mask. Finally, it waved the journeyers into the cave.

Escaping the wind was a relief. A few fires flickered in the cave and the journeyers crowded nearby to bask in the warmth. As the monk who’d met them outside stripped off some of its clothing, Talon marked the furry, snouted face, the four arms and two legs, the bulky form still mostly occluded by robes.

“A Talid,” Khat Lah explained in a whisper. “The sentient natives of Andobi Prime. They are rarely seen offworld.”

Talon counted four other Talid monks the large cave. Several more portals lined the outer wall, leading into deeper caverns. Likely these monks had tended their warrens for tens of thousands of years.

“They remind me of the Keepers of the Whills,” whispered Neshri Buhl as he removed his facemask and gnullith.

“I had the same thought,” muttered Talon.

The monk who’d greeted them said, “I am Nel-An Shora, assistant to the high priest. Where did you uncover this Meleth Yor?”

Khat Lah gestured to the stone carving. “We purchased it from a dealer in antiques.”

“A dealer in plunder.”

“Just so. We’ve returned it to you, as a sign of good faith.”

Nel-An Shora blinked small eyes as he scoured the arrivals. Most of them including Talon had removed their face-wrappings, revealing masquered faces all imitating human ones.

“You say you come in good faith but you come bearing lies,” the Talid said.

Not good. Khat Lah insisted, “We come seeking truth.”

"But you do not show it yourselves. Your faces are not your own."

"Are you so used to human faces, priest?" asked Talon.

"You are not human. The faces you wear sit oddly on you. And," the priest added, "After such time in the cold, your cheeks should be red and flushed. Yours are not. Explain."

He had them there. The group shifted awkwardly, waiting for Khat Lah to lead. Before he said anything a new figure shambled into the cave from a side entrance. It was a Talid like the other monks but draped in red robes, vividly contrasting with the white the others wore. Talon knew nothing about this species' aging but from its hunched form and grey fur, she guessed this monk was quite elderly.

The other monks made small gasps of surprise, and Nel-An Shora bowed in obedience. The two Talids passed short words in their own tongue before the younger priest turned to the visitors and said, "This is Ten-Abu Donba, high priest and master of ritual. He does you great honor by exposing you to his presence."

"This is not the first time he and I have met," said Khat Lah, eying the high priest. "I came alone that time. It was about eight years ago, by your reckoning."

Ten-Abu Donba walked close and looked Khat Lah over. In a deeper voice he said, "You seem... familiar to me."

"I came as Reikar Horn."

"But you are *not* Reikar Horn. I understood that even then." The high priest glanced over the others, then back to Khat Lah. "You did not deal fairly with us then, so we gave you nothing."

"I remember. I'm prepared to tell the truth this time."

"You've already deceived us once," said Nel-An Shora. "You are doing it even now."

"Not anymore," Khat Lah insisted.

He pushed the hood of his jacket away and reached to the back of his neck. Talon gasped but did nothing as his oog lith masquer parted, peeling away from the middle of his face, retreating up his scalp and finally baring all of his Yuuzhan Vong face, neither scarred nor tattooed but still unmistakable as the mien of a feared invader.

He faced his followers and said, "Reveal yourselves. All of you."

Neshri Buhl started to remove his masquer next, then Xahn Carr, then the others. Talon was one of the last, but she did it. The pain of the oogolith's removal actually brought sensation to her frostbitten face. Finally they all stood exposed and honest before the monks: a dozen Yuuzhan Vong and one Sith. The Talids were impressively stoic. Perhaps, isolated as they were, they'd never had direct experience with either hated group.

Ten-Abu Donba said, "I understand what you wanted to hide. And I appreciate the bravery of your revelation."

"Have you met our kind before?" asked Neshri Buhl.

"Yours, no." The high priest looked to Talon. "Hers, yes."

She stiffened. "When?"

"Many centuries ago. They did great damage before we drove them away."

"I mean you no harm."

Ten-Abu Donba regarded her with narrowed eyes, then asked Khat Lah, "Do you swear that she will not harm us?"

"On my honor, I swear it." His conviction sounded total; she found herself touched.

"Very well. Then we will allow her to stay... for a time."

Nel-An Shora asked Ten-Abu Donba something in their own tongue. His eyes were on Talon, suspicious, and she could guess well enough what he'd said. The high priest responded, and the younger one nodded reluctant obedience.

Ten-Abu Donba spread all four arms in benediction and said, "You are now our guests here. We will answer your questions... as long as you answer ours."

"That is not a problem," Khat Lah bowed his head. "As I said, we have much to share with you."

It had been four years since they'd been to Esseles, but everything seemed the same. The Thrumble Memorial Foundation building perched on a cliff's edge while ocean waves crashed on rock far below. The outside air was salty and thick, the inside air pristine and dry. The halls were white and clean and the staff, both organic and mechanical, moved about with quick efficiency. It was good how some things never changed.

The Foundation's director of operations certainly hadn't. When AG-37 had first introduced them to his "mother" Guri, Jariah had been confused but mostly enticed. The woman was

tall and blonde and immaculately shaped, physically perfect from the crown of her head to her boots. So perfect it made a weird kind of sense she was a droid. Nature rarely produced her kind of measurements.

Jariah hadn't sensed it then, but he could feel it now, as they joined her in the laboratory where she'd taken R2-D2. More accurately, he *couldn't* feel it. She was totally absent from the Force and it left him feeling weird, like he was watching a holo-display of a woman instead of the real-seeming one.

Guri had brought them in to show what she'd done to R2. The little astromech sat deactivated on all three legs with the crown of his dome removed. A half-dozen cables connected R2's bald head to the computer beside Guri. Another cable connected the computer to the datapad she held in her lap as she sat on the workbench, one long leg crossed over the other.

"It's taken some time," she said, "But we've done what we could for Artoo. The emergency repairs you did on him at Kiffex were mostly sound. I've also gone ahead and replaced his motivator and cortical activation circuit with newer technology."

"So is he ready to turn back on?" asked Deliah.

"It's more complicated than that. Artoo's a very unique droid and the power surge affected systems that I can't easily replace."

"Oh no," moaned C-3PO, who'd been twitching anxiously but quiet until now.

"Did you get a chance to look at the cards that started this whole mess?" asked Cade.

"I did." Guri tilted her chin to a worktable, where the dozen datacards sat in their gray box. "We have readers to access the data. It was helpful, actually."

"So what's on those things? Tell me we didn't mess up Artoo for nothing."

"In a sense, I think Artoo *is* what's on them. I reviewed the information and it certainly looked like back-ups from Artoo's memory core."

"So it's stuff he already has in him?" asked Jariah.

Guri gave a good imitation of a human sigh. "That's where it gets complicated. The part of Artoo that really got damaged was his internal experiential data storage drive, specifically the

chips that contain compiler algorithms. I've had to replace those entirely."

After a second, Jariah asked, "Can you translate that?"

"I believe I understand now," said C-3PO. "You mean to say that Artoo's memories are intact... But they lack sequence?"

"Essentially yes," Guri nodded.

"Wait a minute," frowned Deliah. "I've done some work on droids. I know how basic memory works. Information gets aggregated and stored in memory banks one micro-circuit at a time. Each second's worth of data is timestamped."

"For some droids, yes. But as we all know, Artoo is a little unusual." Guri's smile was wistful as she stroked his dome. "He's been active, without a memory wipe, for almost two hundred years. That's decades older than me. That's a *lot* of experiential data to acquire and no droid had infinite storage capacity. That's why memory wipes are considered a necessity for most droids. There simply isn't enough room for them to keep remembering things.

"One of the most important modifications I received from Massad Thrumble was what he called *Self-Selective Access Memory*. He gave me an algorithm that allowed me to *choose* which memories I retained, and which I allowed to be overwritten. Specifically he allowed me to designate experiences in three tiered categories." She counted off on her fingers. "There are immediate, short-term experiences. *Now*, in other words, though my processor stores everything within one standard week. Then there are long-term but noncritical memories that can be overwritten as necessary. Last are long-term critical memories. Specific experiences that I designate to *never* be erased, even after a hundred years or more."

They thought about that. Jariah muttered, "Must be nice, picking and choosing what you remember."

"Some things I choose to remember aren't nice, and I'm not proud of them." Her smile dropped to a serious line. "But they're critical to making me *me*, so I still remember them."

"Yeah, I get what you're saying," said Cade. "But how does that matter here? Did your Thrumble guy get his fingers in Artoo?"

"I don't think so." She stroked the blue dome again. "But Thrumble designed my memory retention pattern after a

human's. Whoever modified Artoo's retention systems- I'm guessing a former owner- set him up with something very similar. The programming is a little sloppy and less professional, so I'm guessing it was some gifted amateur. The point is, though, Artoo has been selecting and preserving critical memories for over a hundred and fifty years. When he preserved critical memories he moved the relevant data to a new storage site, with a new designation." Guri glanced at Deliah. "That process removed the in-built timestamp."

"So he's all mixed up in the head," Deliah said.

"That's right. In effect, he's lost his sense of time. What that will actually *mean* for him, I'm not sure. I wanted to explain all to this to you before I reactivated him."

"You can do that right now?"

"Anytime you're ready," Guri nodded.

"So the stuff on those datacards," Cade said, "Are *they* his critical memories? And are they in order?"

"Yes, and I know what you're thinking. To upload those files into Artoo's critical memory core I'd have to overwrite what's already in there. The memories would be in sequence, yes, but those backups are over a century old. I'd be effectively erasing a hundred years of experiences for Artoo, including all his time with you."

That hardly sounded appealing. Scowling, Cade said, "I guess we got no choice but to flip him on and see what happens."

"His short-term memory processor appears to be intact, so he *should* be able to interact with us here." Guri tapped her datapad. "Just in case, I'm going to stay connected to his cortical processor. I can input commands directly or initiate an emergency shut-down if I have to."

"That's good." Cade looked to C-3PO. "Unless you're got any objections, professor, I'm going to turn him on."

Voice trembling slightly, the protocol droid said, "Please begin activation."

Guri typed the command into her datapad. They waited for a breathless second, then heard the faint hum of R2's internal processors. The lights on his dome winked on. His head shifted from side to side, like he was taking them in with the sweep of his photoreceptor.

"So far so good," Deliah muttered.

R2's first sound was querulous, with a rising pitch. Guri frowned.

"What's he saying?" asked Jariah. He'd never really gotten the hang of droid-speak.

"Artoo asks, essentially..." C-3PO hesitated. "Is this *now*?"

"It's the only *now* I've got." Cade stepped forward and squatted in front of R2's photoreceptor. "You remember me, buddy? You know who I am?"

The droid stared at him for a long moment, then whistled.

"Oh, thank goodness," said C-3PO. "He recognizes you as Cade Skywalker."

"Hey, not bad," Cade grinned.

Yet R2 began twittering tunelessly. He rocked back and forth on two legs as though anxious.

C-3PO sounded even more nervous. "Oh dear, oh dear. Artoo says he is attempting to compile all his memory files containing you, Master Cade, but they are... confused. He knows *who* you are, but not *what* you are."

"He's probably seen a lot of different sides of you," Deliah muttered. "Not sure which one he's dealing with now."

Cade frowned. "Is that right? Can you show us any better what he's thinking now?"

Guri typed into her datapad. "I'm commanding him to replay a memory of you. Whichever one his processor deems most relevant at this time."

R2 stopped rocking and wailing. He was totally still for a second, like he'd shut down, but then the holo-projector beside his photoreceptor flickered on and projected a blue image with beside Cade. Jariah bent to get a better look at it. The recording, taken from the angle of R2's meter-high photoreceptor, showed Cade all right, sitting in *Mynock's* cockpit. And, Jariah noted, he had a death stick in his hand, unopened.

"Ah, there you are," the Cade in the recording said, though there was nobody else visible. After a pause, as though he'd been listening to a voice, Cade continued, "Yeah, I am. One time. Too much in my head... *on* my head." He leaned back in the chair. "Just want to relax a little- sleep- but I can't expect the great Luke Skywalker to understand that."

"Oh kark me," the real Cade groaned, more from embarrassment than anger.



The recorded Cade muttered, "Learned some Sith methods too. Maybe I should try one of those."

And the real Cade said, "This ain't what it looks like. I'm not crazy."

And the recorded one jumped from his chair and spun to shout at someone who wasn't there. "*You* showed me a new trick in the Sith Temple, Dad! Breaking stuff with the Force! That lead to the light side? What makes you think you can just appear after seven years and start dictating what I do? If you don't want me using that technique as a weapon, then you never shoulda shown it to me."

The recorded Cade, scowling, stared at nothing and seemed to listen to unheard words. Eventually he turned away, flicked open the death stick, and muttered, barely audibly, "I can escape it- and you- for one night."

"For *poodoo's* sake, turn it off already," the real Cade said.

Guri tapped her datapad and the holo winked to nothing. Cade stood to full height and waved his hand. "That was... not me at my best."

"I say, sir," said C-3PO tremulously, "Were you truly speaking to... Master Luke?"

"Force ghosts. Him and my dad. They used to tag-team me back in the bad old days when I needed somebody to tell me not to be such a *sleemo*." He shook his head at R2. "I can't believe *that's* the first memory that comes up when you think of me. Really?"

"That's not necessarily his most dominant memory of you," said Guri. "More likely, I think it was retrieved at random. He can't *have* dominant memories because he lacks a sequence to put them in. Without time there's no context and without context he can't understand anything."

"Well how do we give them order?" asked Deliah.

Guri typed into her datapad. "I'm inputting keywords Artoo can cross-search with. Common phrases marking first meetings, introductions, and the like. If he can mark when he first met you, it might make it easier for him to compile things in some order."

After giving a second for the command to process, Cade asked, "Well, Artoo? Can you remember when you first met me?"

Without a tweet in response, R2's holo-projector lit up again. This new image showed the furl of a brown Jedi-robe, then Cade standing beyond it, dressed in his old black longcoat. Behind him loomed *Mynock's* bulk. Jariah realized this must have been when Cade ran off to Ossus on his own, before he went to infiltrate Krayt's Sith temple.

A voice, probably the Jedi, said, "This is Artoo-detoo. As it happens, he has served your family a long, long time. He has been updated to the current specs. You *do* need a mechanic, don't you?"

"I guess," the recorded Cade said skeptically. "Well, c'mon chips for brains. Let's get to the ship."

The recorded R2 made a rude series of tweets. Cade snorted, "Yeah? Well, the only piece of junk I see around here is *you*!"

"Alright, stop recording," Cade said. "I guess that one's a *little* better. But how is this going to help him rebuild his other memories?"

Guri entered something else into her datapad. "I'm uploading some algorithms that will, hopefully, let Artoo reconstruct things based on observed rules of cause-and-effect. I don't think this will work for everything. Some of his critical memories, especially older ones, may be spaced far between. It will be harder to establish context for those." She looked at them meaningfully. "You may have to walk him through them and order them manually."

That could take forever. Jariah pointed out, "We haven't even *been* with Artoo that long. Not sure how much help we can give."

Deliah patted C-3PO's golden back. "This might be where you come in, professor."

"That is not so simple," C-3PO said. "Artoo and I have had many adventures, yes, but I was inactive for many decades, and I've also suffered several memory wipes." The droid sounded more nervous than usual. "In fact, I cannot remember Artoo's and my first meeting."

"You've never asked him about it?" said Cade.

"I... have sir, sir. For some reason he refused to answer."

"Maybe he'll have less qualms now. Hey, Artoo? Can you locate your first memory of C-3PO here?"

The astromech hooted uncertainly, but after a moment his

holo-projector lit up once more. It showed what looked like the inside of a house with walls of mudbrick or cemented sand.

"Come on! Let me show you my droid!" a voice called, and from R2's low vantage point they watched as a boy shaggy-haired boy, barely taller than the astromech, stepped ahead. The boy led R2 and another figure down a hall to a bedroom. When it stepped far enough away they could make out the second human as a dark-haired teenage girl.

The boy clambered onto a nook in the wall and pulled a sheet off the half-completed body of a protocol droid. The metal skeleton and servomotors were half-buried beneath a tangle of wiring, and no exterior plates had been added to protect the machine's components.

"Isn't he great?" asked the boy. "He's not finished yet."

"He's wonderful," said the girl.

"You really like him? He's a protocol droid, to help Mom. Watch."

The boy leaned forward and flicked the activation switch at the back of C-3PO's neck. One of the droid's photoreceptors lit up and he awkwardly sat upright.

He lacked the elegant gold face but the prissy voice was instantly familiar. "Oh... oh... where is everybody?"

"Woops," said the boy, who grabbed the second photoreceptor from his work bench and inserted it where it belonged.

"Oh," said the droid, "I am See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations. How may I serve you?"

"He's perfect," the girl smiled.

The kid beamed. "When the storm is over, I'll show you the racer, I'm building a podracer..." He was clearly trying to impress the girl, though she looked six or seven years older than him. *Good luck with that*, Jariah thought.

C-3PO stood fully upright and took trembling steps away from the bench. R2-D2 whistled curiously and the taller droid said, "I am... not sure if this floor is entirely stable... Oh, hello. I don't believe we have been introduced."

R2 whistled cheerily in reply. C-3PO said, "Artoo-detoo? A pleasure to meet you. I am See-threepio, human-cyborg relations."

R2 made a series of ruder noises.

"I'm sorry, I beg your pardon... What do you mean, naked? My parts are showing? My goodness!"

Flustered, the droid turned away. Cade said, "That's enough, Artoo."

The holo winked off and the real C-3PO pivoted away, as embarrassed as his recorded version. "Oh dear, oh dear," he fretted. "That was... quite shameful..."

Jariah allowed a smirk. The process would be laborious, but it might be entertaining too.

Talon had thought the trek to the monastery was unbearably harsh and dangerous, but she was learning to regret her haste. The wind lashing them now was absolutely bone-chilling, and it was a struggle just to stand. The deep snow-drifts ironically planted them in place and kept them from being thrown into the rocky crevasse below.

Their guide, Nel-An Shora, directed their attention not to the jagged fall but to higher summits. Speaking loudly to be heard over the wind he said, "Tradition holds that for one thousand years, a mountain stood between those peaks. Though it was covered in snow, we Dai Bendu monks were drawn to it. We could feel the power within it, and for a thousand years, successive generations meditated here on its mystery."

Idly, Talon wondered whether the planet's climate had been any less hostile then. Likely these stocky, six-limbed Talids were built for cold weather in a way Twi'leks were not.

"Accord to tradition," said the monk, "At the end of the thousand years the mountain itself awakened. With a great rumble it shook off its snow, opened its bright gates, and allowed those most devoted monks to step inside. When the ark was full the mountain rose into the sky and soared away, taking our pilgrims to a greater plane."

Or, Talon thought, to Tython. She'd already gotten a decent explanation of how the Je'daii Order was assembled on that ancient world. This was corroboration, but not particularly useful.

"You keep speaking of tradition." Talon had to shout over the wind. "Do you have written records?"

"Not from that era, no. But we have kept scrupulous oral traditions."

Talon didn't trust hearsay passed down for millennia, even if it was 'scrupulous,' but she held her tongue and let the monk go on.

"For tens of thousands of years since, the Dai Bendu have venerated those who went beyond. The sediment shaken off by the mountain- the Tho Yor- when it ascended was collected. We packed them and molded them into the holy stones, the Meleth Yor. Over the centuries so many of them have been lost, often plundered by supposed pilgrims." Here he paused and gave them a suitable suspicious look.

"We have returned one Meleth Yor to you," Xahn Carr said indignantly.

"Indeed. And the high priest is grateful." Nel-An Shora folded one set of hands. "That is why we share our knowledge with you."

"Do Dai Bendu still come to this place and meditate?" asked Khat Lah, gesturing to the gap between mountains that marked the Tho Yor's old resting place.

"It is a ritual that we fast at this place for ten days," Nel-An Shora nodded.

These Talids were hardy creatures. Talon said, "The Tho Yor is long gone. Why do you meditate on a void?"

"In contemplating the void we contemplate ourselves. But perhaps you would not understand that."

Talon rankled. Whatever that Sith visitor had done to the Dai Bendu centuries ago, it had left an impression. The past day had been full of little passive-aggressive barbs. Toward the Yuuzhan Vong, in comparison, they were positively polite. But compared to the other indignities Talon had suffered these were minor, so she took them in silence.

Nel-An Shora at least seemed to appreciate that his guests were not built for cold weather, so he began to trek back to the caverns. It passed in silence and the Yuuzhan Vong, like Talon, were eager to get back to shelter. When they did they hovered by the fire and peeled back their clothes, exposing faces scarred and tattooed. There was no point in masquerades here.

As she pocketed her gnullith, Talon told Khat Lah, "We've gained little. There was a Tho Yor here once, but no longer. They clearly have no idea where it went."

"Indeed," the Yuuzhan Vong admitted.

“Then is there any reason to stay?”

He regarded her with faint amusement. “The Sith never taught patience, did they?”

“It was not high among their priorities,” she said dryly. “Is there another purpose for us here?”

“The monks have offered us hospitality for a few more days. I see no harm in taking them.”

“And just what is there to do here?”

“Contemplate the void, perhaps.”

Talon remembered, after she’d joined Khat Lah’s band, how she’d asked with honest bafflement why he’d taken her aboard. Khat Lah had explained how his people had let darkness consume them, been stripped of the Force, and wandered the spatial and spiritual void between galaxies for centuries. Through that struggle, with the help of the Jedi, they’d begun the long difficult path toward redemption. Some had even regained the Force.

The analogy to her situation was obvious, but she still didn’t see what good it did. She felt like she’d been wandering in circles for the past three years, neither gaining nor losing anything. This was just one more pointless gyre.

“Patience,” Khat Lah chided. “There is wisdom to be found in stillness. I believe these monks have gained some.”

“If they are, they’re not in the mood to share with me.”

“Perhaps they don’t share because they sense you’re not open.”

She admitted his point with a grudging nod. “What would you have me do?”

Khat Lah shook his head. “I’d not have you do anything, except what you will.”

This Yuuzhan Vong might not have been a Jedi, but he could be just as frustrating. “You know what I’m capable of doing, if I choose to.”

“But you do not. I believe that means something.” She gave a frustrated snort and shook her head. Thoughtfully, the Yuuzhan Vong asked, “Would you believe that I welcomed you because I felt the Force has a purpose for you?”

“Not particularly,” she said.

“Believe what you will.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “But it is true.”

Leaving her with that, he walked away. Talon scowled. Jedi were the ones who supposedly worked the Force's purpose. Sith wrenched their purpose from the Force. Despite that fact, she found herself warmed by the hope that what he'd said was true. It would mean her life had not been wasted after all.

## Chapter Thirteen

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The Federation Senate was, by some counts, the largest electoral body in galactic history, and it barely managed to cram the offices of its members into four separate wings attached to the grand convocational rotunda. Each of the four buildings was a broad rectangular block rather than a tower, and each possessed its own climate control, security apparatus, and communications suite. One of Marasiah Fel's policies, continued by Chalk, had been to mix senators from Imperial and Alliance sectors, small ones and large, so that representatives from all types were forced to share the same hallways. The hope had been to promote accord between groups.

As she walked the hall the south building, it seemed to Saarai to have worked. She knew as well as anyone that in politics a calm face could mask internal strife, and without the Force she could only read the faces of the senators and staffers as they passed. Nonetheless, they seemed to lack a certain tension that had been ubiquitous during the senate's first weeks, when Alliance and Imperial representatives had been at each other's metaphorical throats.

When acting as Porat's behind-the-scenes organizer she'd worked more from their apartment than the senate offices, but she was no stranger to these halls. For that reason she'd come with a new face as well as false identification cards. As visual disguises went it was not rigorous; she'd dyed her skin a darker blue, added contact lenses that brightened her eye color, and added prosthetics that gave her more prominent nose and eyebrow-ridges. That had gotten her past front-door security



with no problem, and after walking down the halls for ten minutes it was clear she hadn't triggered any facial-recognition software on the ubiquitous holocams.

Insertion onto Coruscant had gone well too. The shuttle had landed without issue at Westport. Saaraï had made contact with the handful of resistance agents in Galactic City and gotten access to a safehouse in Calocour Heights, should they need it. Jao Assam, with Ania Solo watching his back, had used a public-access comm terminal to send a burst of messages to Yalta Val, setting up a rendezvous this evening. According to the four-Bothan commando team that had watched that comm terminal for the rest of the day, no suspicious persons had come to investigate the call.

Saaraï tried to feel confident, but it was strange to be back here. It brought back so many memories of Porat; the ambitions they'd shared and the life they'd fancied they'd build together. Even after losing the Force much of her has still been Sith; not the malice and spite but the ego and arrogance. She'd truly believed that together they could wrestle control of the Federation government from Imperial die-hards and make the galaxy anew.

Events since had taught her humility. Many things could go wrong; some surely would. One could only proceed with cautious steps, one at a time.

Saaraï was taking a big one now. She took a breath, then stepped into the offices of Senator Monia Gahan. The receptionist at the foyer suite was a young Mon Cal male with mottled pink and blue skin. Saaraï walked to the counter and said, "Good afternoon, I'm Lenoa Aress, from Aquatic Access. I have an appointment to see the senator."

She waited as the Mon Cal checked his datapad. Aquatic Access was real enough; the Chagrian NGO specialized in low-cost underwater construction and had recently begun helping erect settlements on Bavinyar. A friendly staffer had called ahead and gotten Saaraï onto Monia's schedule.

"I see your appointment," the Mon Cal confirmed. "Please take a seat. The senator will see you when she's ready."

Saaraï did just that. It took longer than she'd expected, some fifteen minutes, before the receptionist gave her the go-ahead. He explained the directions- the door on the right, down the

hall, second door on the left- but Saaraï didn't need them. Monia Gahan's offices were unchanged after three years. She hoped the senator would be too.

On first glance she was the same. The salmon-colored senator was seated behind her desk, a broad window and the government district skyline at her back. As soon as her bulbous eyes settled on the newcomer they blinked twice in fast succession, a mark of surprise.

"Greetings, Senator," Saaraï said, neatly folding her hands in front of her. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

She'd changed her appearance, but not her voice. Monia heard it clearly. She blinked again and said, "It's no problem at all. Aquatic Access has been very helpful with the situation on Bavinyar. Your organization deserves special thanks."

"I'm glad to hear that, but I'm afraid I'm not here to speak on their behalf."

"I see." Monia stared at her. "I thought so. Why *are* you here?"

"Can we speak freely?"

"I learned how to search for listening devices with the Rogues. I do it every morning."

Saaraï relaxed to a smile. "Anj Dahl will be glad to hear it."

Monia was still cautious. The room might not be bugged but she'd need proof this unfamiliar Chagrian was who she implied. "What do you know about my former commanding officer?"

"I know quite a bit. But I think she should tell you herself."

Saaraï tool a holo-projector disk out of her robes and placed it on Monia's desk. She leaned forward and whispered five unrelated words in Chagrian; the code unlocked the projector, which beamed blue light over the desktop.

Shown in head-and-shoulder view, facing Monia, the recording of Anj Dahl said, "Rogue Seven, I hope this get to you. We haven't talked in a damn long time and there's too much I want to say in person. But here's the gist. Yes, the woman in front of you is Saaraï Derrol, and yes, we've been working together in the resistance for the past three years. We've risked a lot to come to you with a request.

"I'm not going to try and order you to fulfill it, since you're the senator now and I'm just some outlaw. I'm not going to try

and guilt-trip you either. You have your obligations. We have ours. I hope they will coincide.

“And that’s it. Listen to what Saaraï has to say. Every word of it’s the truth. And when you hear it all, you can judge how you want to proceed.

“Thanks for listening. Rogue Leader, out.”

The holo shrunk to nothing. Monia stared at the dead disk until Saaraï took it and put it back in her robes. Finally the Mon Cal turned her big eyes upward. Her first words out were shaky. “I didn’t know if any of you survived.”

“Some of us did,” Saaraï said. She’d been told not to give too many names.

“...Did Porat?”

She shook her head. “He died on *Alliance*. So did Jhoram Bey.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“That battle was a slaughter. Admiral Fenel didn’t even give us a chance to surrender. Even escape pods were destroyed.”

The Mon Cal made a deep, guttural noise in her throat. “I thought it... unusual that no prisoners were taken.”

“Chalk wanted to make sure there were no survivors. No opposition. Those of us who made it out for lucky.”

“The official story... never sat right with me,” Monia admitted.

“And Brighton?” Saaraï couldn’t expect the speaker of the senate to throw his support behind the rebels, but she wanted to know his position.

“The speaker accepted Chalk and Fenel’s version of events. He had nothing else to go on.” Monia hesitated, then asked, “What *really* happened on Coruscant during the trial?”

“You don’t accept that story either?”

“I don’t know what to believe. Neither do a lot of senators.”

“Including Brighton?”

Monia gave the tiniest nod.

“I was with Porat when *Mon Elusia* came to Coruscant,” Saaraï explained. “We came there to stall the trial, and to make a public statement.”

Which wasn’t wholly true. They’d also done it to provide a distraction while Ania Solo’s people rescued Marasiah Fel. They’d succeeded but had no Marasiah as proof of their claim.

Therefore, Ekorian and Sukharr had said not to mention the ex-empress at all.

“What about the attack?” Monia asked. “Those Alliance pilots who were captured after the fight... were they real?”

“Yes, but they had nothing to do with Johram Bey or Porat. They were a radical faction who jumped the gun when they saw *Mon Elusia* over Coruscant.” Saarai hesitated, then said, “It’s possible they were lured into attacking by Chalk himself.”

Monia didn’t have to ask why Chalk would do such a thing. She was a canny enough politician to understand that Chalk had gained from that attack like no one else. She asked, “Do you have any proof?”

“Not directly, no.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“I know.”

Monia sighed. “You know I want to believe you. I counted you and Anj as friends. Then they said you were traitors, terrorists. And then they said you were dead.”

“Neither of those things are true. Chalk is a liar and a criminal.”

“But you have no proof. Not even evidence. I might believe your words but the other senators, the rest of the galaxy...” She waved an uncertain flipper.

“I know that we had nothing to do with the attack on Coruscant. And I know what happened to Admiral Bey’s fleet was a war crime. I know the peace you have now is built on lies and blood.” Saarai leaned forward. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Monia stared into those eyes, then looked away. “I believe what you’re saying.”

It was a start. “Thank you.”

“Saarai... How do you think this will end?”

She’d asked herself that a lot and only come up with one answer. “We’ll probably fail. And Chalk will kill us as ruthlessly as he killed Bey, Porat and the rest. But we’ll keep fighting anyway. I owe Porat that much.”

Monia’s gaze drifted out the window. “I thought like that when I was with the Rogues. With Anj and Bey, and Stazi... And with Porat. When we actually did beat Krayt I couldn’t believe it.” One eye turned back to Saarai. “Have you thought

about what might happen if you *do* win?"

The first, ideal plan had been that Marasiah Fel and Gar Stazi would resume their role as dual leaders of the Federation, with Chalk's crimes revealed and punished. But you couldn't turn back time; even if they did liberate Stazi, even if Marasiah came back, it wouldn't be the same.

When Saarai didn't answer, Monia said, "You could destabilize the whole Federation. Create a power vacuum at the top. Pit Alliance against Imperial again. Saarai, you could start another war."

Saarai wanted to say there already was a war and she was fighting it, but that wasn't true. The resistance was a tiny thorn in Hogrum Chalk's side, nothing more. The rest of the galaxy didn't know or care what they did. They were irrelevant, but they fought on out of stubbornness, idealism, or because they had no place else to be.

For Saarai, it always came down to love and grief.

"I know crimes should be punished," she said, "Especially ones that run as deep as Chalk's."

"But you admit you have no evidence. If you *did*, Saarai, it might be different but..."

Compulsion took her. She decided to take the plunge. "Marasiah Fel is alive."

Monia blinked repeatedly. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen her. She was on *Alliance* when it was attacked."

"But the empress--"

"Her death was faked, by Chalk, as pretense for a coup. She was held in prison on Coruscant. *Mon Elusia* was a distraction so another team could extract her. They succeeded and took her back to *Alliance*, but Chalk traced us there. That's how he was able to besiege the entire fleet. Then he set about to kill every last one of us so word she'd survived never got out."

Monia shook her head. "That's too much... Too much. If Fel is alive, then where *is* she?"

"I don't know," Saarai admitted.

"Why not? You went through all that, *lost* all that, to free her. Where did she *go*?"

"The empress is... not the empress anymore. She lost her husband and her throne. She was betrayed by her uncle. Then

her rescuers- hundreds of thousands of them- were massacred because of a tracer Chalk implanted *inside* her body.” Saarai shook her head; memory fell back to the black cold halls of the dead *Alliance*, Marasiah Fel wordlessly tearing out her own white-streaked hair. “I don’t think that’s even the whole of it.”

“So you’re saying Marasiah Fel is alive... But she’s no longer able to be empress, mentally.”

“That’s right.”

“And again you have no evidence, or proof.”

Grimly, Saarai nodded.

Exhausted, Monia sunk into her chair. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I wasn’t supposed to tell you about Marasiah, but it’s *true*.”

“You’ve told me a lot of truth, Saarai, but you can’t prove any of it. And it’s all dangerous truth.”

“I never thought a Rogue would act afraid of truth being dangerous.”

It was a low blow, but it hit. Monia flinched, looked away. “What did you come here for? Anj said you wanted... something from me. What is it?”

“If you’re still interested in hearing truths, even dangerous ones, you can get them from somebody with a lot more authority than me. And I’m sure he wouldn’t be afraid to tell them.”

“You’re talking about Stazi.”

“That’s right. We’ve been putting a lot of effort into finding which prison he’s being held in. We even launched an operation on Praxal VII last week.”

Monia stiffened. “You broke into Praxal VII?”

“Not personally, but yes. It was a trap. We were fed bad intel and cornered but we managed to get most of our people out.” She didn’t add that *most* was just over half, or that they’d only escaped because of lucky last-minute help.

“That’s all the more reason *not* to keep looking for him. Besides, I don’t know what help you think I can give you.” She waved a flipper again. “I’m a senator, a *civilian*. Wherever Stazi’s being kept, he’s under the province of the Correctional Authority and the Security Bureau.”

“You don’t have friends on any oversight committees?”

“I do, but they can’t just ask the FCA or FSB where he is.”

“But there are still avenues you can explore.” Saaraï leaned forward. “Do you believe Stazi really killed Marasiah Fel?”

“Of course not,” Monia snapped, her strongest statement all day. Loyalty to the old admiral ran deep; it unlocked what Saaraï had been looking for all along.

“Then his being locked up is a crime. Even if you don’t believe anything else I’ve told you, you believe that. Can you really just sit here and do nothing?”

“I’m doing many things,” Monia glowered. “I have authority I never dreamed of when I was a Rogue. In representing the refugees from Dac, I have to deal with a dozen different worlds. I lock horns with Bavinyari officials every single day.”

“It’s good you still have fight in you. Now please, turn it to where it *really* matters.”

“The fate of Dac’s refugees matters,” the Mon Cal said, exasperated. “As to the admiral...”

Her resolve was weakening. Saaraï said, “No one ever need know you helped us, not until Stazi is free and leading the resistance again. You can keep helping the refugees, keep doing what you’ve been doing. All we need is a little bit of information. Something to point us in the right direction.”

Monia made that awkward, deep-throated noise again. “I can’t promise anything.”

“I’m not asking for a promise. Only a little inquiry.”

“I... may be able to manage.”

“Even if you can narrow it down to a few prisons, that will help.” Saaraï took out a piece of flimsy with a hand-written address on it. “That’s our safehouse in Calocour. Memorize the contact info, then destroy it. If you learn anything, route it through there.”

Monia laid a webbed hand over it. “I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you, Senator.” Saaraï drew back. “It’s good to see you still having fighting spirit.”

Monia nodded. Not enthusiastically, but she nodded.

That was enough. That was what they needed: small, cautious steps promising boldness to come.

The location of the midnight rendezvous had been chosen by Yalta Val, and it seemed to prioritize secrecy and defensibility. Ania chose to take that as a positive sign.

The site was in East Champianne, just south of Galactic City proper, and effectively in the mid-levels. The top hundred storeys of that particular skyscraper were occupied and aglow, but the fifty levels beneath that were in the process of being gutted, remodeled, and rebuilt. All of the windows and many of the walls had been torn out, leaving a skeleton of ferrocrete and reinforced durasteel supported by external braces and ringed by massive multi-armed construction droids, at this hour inert.

Jao and Yalta Val were meeting at a spot in the middle of that construction zone. With the vertical-shaft braces and construction droids crowded close, there was no space for an airspeeder to make a fast insertion. Because power to that whole area was shut off, it was easy to scan for heat and electric signatures and determine there were no active droids nearby, and no humans except for the one waiting for Jao.

It seemed like Val was on the level, but a trap *would* look like that. Ania recognized the help Val had given them in the past, and she respected Jao's loyalty to his teacher, but she wasn't taking anything on faith. The four Bothans who'd come with them weren't either. The leader, a female named Re'leir with suitably-sneaky black fur, had taken position in the nearest skyscraper facing this tower, tucked on a dark ledge and on-level with Jao and Val. The others had secreted themselves in closer positions; one a few levels below the meeting place, another five levels above, the last on one of the braces.

Ania was further back than those three, perched on the shoulders of a towering, four-armed construction droid. From her angle she was a little too high to see Val standing inside the skeletal building, but she could see Jao when his automated speeder dropped him off on the same level. She watched him watch across the floor's dirty ferrocrete slab, then disappear from view, occluded by the ceiling slab above.

Re'leir and the other Bothans were good snipers, if it came to that. Ania was here to watch and warn. She looked away from the construction zone and scanned the surrounding area with macrobinoculars. No signs of action above or below, or on the surrounding buildings. It seemed like Val had come alone, no backup whatsoever. That could mean he had no allies he could trust in the Knights and would need extraction. Or it could be part of a trap.



They'd find out one way or another. Settling down flat on the construction droid's broad shoulder, Ania faced the construction zone, tapped on her earpiece, and listened to the conversation start.

They stood facing each other from two meters apart. The ferrocrete floor sprawled all around them, bare except for a little dirt. The walls on this storey had all been peeled away and beyond the vertical streak of gray support pillars there was only night-black. Cool wind blew, whistling through the girders.

Master Val looked different. That was Jao's first thought. It wasn't the face- he could barely see it through dark shadows- or even the clothes, though his usual scarlet armor was replaced with a drab civilian tunic. Something in his bearing was off. The poise and confidence Jao expected from his master was missing.

"Thank you for being here, Jao," Val said. "I know you must have come a long way."

Jao simply nodded. "You know what we need to talk about."

"I know Stazi wasn't at Praxal VII."

"No. It was Nelloran. We didn't get him out either."

"I heard some of your people escaped, though. And it sounded like you were involved with that."

"Did Chalk share that intelligence with you?"

"Not directly. He merely... left it where I'd see it. Like he left the information about Stazi being held at Praxal VII."

It was what Jao wanted to believe. When he'd met Val the first time, about three months ago, he'd told the man everything. His master had been skeptical at first, asking where the empress was if she was still alive. Jao knew but hadn't risked sharing the answer. Nonetheless by the end of their talk Val had seemed to believe him. A few weeks later, he'd passed on the intel about Stazi being at Praxal VII. Jao thought he'd convinced Val and won his master over to his side once again, but he still needed to be sure.

"What did the report you read about Praxal VII say?"

Val thought. "It said the rebel operatives had freed Nelloran from his cage, but the senator was recaptured after that. It said the first rebel evacuation shuttle was destroyed, but a second ship- one the same model as your *Free Agent*- swooped in after

the rebel Crossfires destroyed the Hapan gravity well mine.”

“Did it say how many dead we’d left behind?”

He thought again. “There were three bodies, I think. And the report also said one other prisoner, a minor rebel supporter, had been freed and escaped with the infiltrators.”

All true, but the report was missing one critical aspect. “Anything else?”

Val blinked, considered. “That’s what I remember.”

The rebels had figured out a while ago that Chalk was keeping his Force-using weapon, Eli Horn, a secret. Horn’s very existence would raise uncomfortable questions from the remaining Imperial Knights. The rebels had, likewise, not advertised what Kyra could do. When Jao had prodded in their first meeting, he’d gathered the Knights were ignorant of either Force-user. That still seemed to be the case.

That was still was no guarantee Val wasn’t working with Chalk. Jao wished he had the Force and could real his master for the truth. As it was, he had to trust his instinct, and his instinct said Val was telling the truth.

“You’ve been set up,” Jao told him, “and that means you need an extraction. We can give you that.”

Val shook his head, reluctant. “I’m an Imperial Knight. I swore an oath.”

“Not to Chalk. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“It’s not about Chalk. The Knights... they’re *lost*, Jao. They have no drive, no purpose. I can’t abandon my brothers and sisters.”

Jao knew he didn’t mean it as a barb against his apprentice who’d left the order, but it stung like one. “Master, there’s nothing you can do here. Chalk knows you’re a liability. You’re lucky he hasn’t arrested you or arranged some kind of accident.”

“I know. I watched my back the whole way here. I’d never put you in danger.”

“I never doubted that. But Master, if you’re clear now, that’s all the more reason to go. We have a ship that can take us away right now.”

He knew it was more complicated than that; Saara had a separate mission, still ongoing, but they’d work out an escape once Val was firmly with them.

His master exhaled and looked around the barren building, the night beyond. "You brought allies with you, I assume?"

"Yes. They'll extract us both on my signal."

Jao took a step closer. Val remained where he was. He watched the conflict on his master's face and saw him gradually admit to himself the hard truths he'd been avoiding.

Jao reached out a hand. "Please, come with me. It's the only way to keep you safe. Once we're gone from here we'll figure out what happens next. Just *come*."

Ania had figured it would go like this. Jao was a softy at heart, and his skepticism toward his former master had lasted all of ten seconds. For better or worse, it looked like they were going to pick up a new team member. Still lying flat on her stomach on the construction droid's shoulder, she tapped her earpiece and switched to Re'leir's frequency.

"This is Ania," she whispered. "Are you ready for evac?"

"I can call the speeder drone back now."

Ania waited a moment, then asked, "Well? Are you going to do it? Or does something about this not smell right to you?"

"The smell is acceptable, but Assam shouldn't have promised immediate escape. We'll need to take Val to the safehouse and scan him for tracers before we go anywhere."

"But we can get him out of here, right?"

After another pause, the Bothan said, "Yes. I'll recall the drone now."

"Sounds good," Ania said, then tapped her earpiece and went back to Jao's audio channel.

The pickup was still clear and strong, and she heard Val saying, "There's no way to be sure that list is even accurate. If I had more time to look into things--"

"Chalk will arrest you the second he realizes what you're doing. Or he'll kill you."

"Maybe," Val admitted dryly, "Assuming I find the right prison this time. If I had just one or two more days to continue checking--"

"It's too risky."

"It's my life to risk, Jao. People died because of the bad intel I gave you. If I can get it right this time, that will be some recompense."

Maybe they wouldn't need to extract Val after all. It sounded like he was narrowing in on the *real* location of Stazi's prison, in which case him staying with the Imperial Knights, essentially undercover, could be worth the risk. It would be hard to make Jao accept that, though.

She could tell he was struggling for a counter-argument. She tapped her earpiece again, putting her on Re'leir's channel, and told the Bothan, "What do you think? Grab him or let him stay?"

The response was silence. Ania tapped her link back to Jao's channel, then back to Re'leir, and hailed the Bothan again. Still nothing.

Not good. Ania pushed herself to a crouch and crept around the droid's oversized head, onto its spine. She brought up her binoculars and peered at the spot where Re'leir was hidden. It was dark and she had to switch to infrared to see one warm patch, totally still and lying flat. The heat reading was a little lower than she'd expected. It was the kind you'd see from a freshly-killed body starting to cool.

"Ah, *shab* me," Ania gasped. She scampered back to the droid's shoulder and looked down on the construction zone. No motion. She swung her macrobinoculars up, sweeping the higher levels for heat signatures, until she spotted two living-hot blobs, leaning off the edge of the ferrocrete slab.

Snipers. Ania swore again and scampered behind the droid's dead, shielding herself from the construction zone. She tapped her earpiece and said, "Jao, can you hear me! *Jao!*"

After a second he said, "Ania? What's wrong?"

"It's a trap! They've got snipers on top! They got Re'leir, maybe the others too!"

As she talked she scanned the other nearby buildings with her binoculars. No shooters she could see, but she couldn't be sure. She prayed Re'leir had summoned the speeder drone before being shot; otherwise they were completely doomed.

"Jao, you need to get out of there! Jao! Jao?"

She heard the crack of laserfire over the comm, and beneath it the thrum of Yalta Val's igniting lightsaber. Fat lot of good that would do them without the Force, she thought. Standing up, she cautiously perked over the droid's tall head and scanned the construction zone with her binoculars. As she'd feared,

troopers had repelled on fiberchord cables from those higher storeys and had swung onto Jao's. As she watched the last one was landing both feet on the ferrocrete slab.

Ania swore again. She couldn't do much but she could do one thing. Dropping the binoculars, she hurried around the droid's head for a clearer shot, drawing the blaster rifle slung over her shoulder as she did so. When she came around she lifted the thing in both hands and popped off a spray of laser bolts. They soared far and wide, and to her mild shock, one of them even caught that repelling trooper in the back. He swayed, feet perched on edge, then tumbled back, limp hand releasing his cable gun, and plunged into the blackness below.

That evened the score just a little. Ania's reward was the flash of laser bolts directed at her from a sniper above. If they hadn't pinpointed her location before, they sure as *shab* had now.

Muttering more of her mother's Mando profanities, Ania squatted behind the droid's head. Cover would only last until the shooters repositioned or brought in reinforcements. She had no idea how she was going to get out of this one, but just as despair started to overwhelm her, she caught the running lights of the automated speeder as it swooped past, blindly and bravely diving toward Jao for the rescue.

Jao saw the blast coming at him and pivoted away. As the blue stun-bolt whipped past his eye, white heat seared his scalp and he ducked low before Master Val's spinning lightsaber took off his head. Jao had no idea how well the older man could wield that weapon without the Force and did what he could with his own weapon of choice. He dropped to one knee and popped off a return shot, but his attacker had ducked behind a durasteel support pillar.

By Jao's count, five troopers had repelled down from different sides of the buildings and swung onto their level. Jao and Val were stuck in the middle, trying to repel attacks from all directions, totally exposed and without cover. At this rate they'd last seconds before taking stun blasts.

He had no idea how to avoid capture until he spotted the dark metal hull of the automated airspeeder stop alongside the northwest corner of the building at the exact same spot it had dropped Jao off at. When the attackers didn't immediately

move to cut off their escape route, Jao popped up, hooked a hand inside Val's left elbow, and tugged.

Still gripping his lightsaber with both hands, Val glanced sideways, saw the speeder, and nodded. They ran together, Val batting back attacks, Jao spraying laserfire in all directions frantically, not aiming to take down any of the attacks, just keep them cowering behind support pillars until they reached the escape zone.

When they were almost there a sixth soldier in black appeared from above, rode his fiberchord down and dropped onto the ferrocrete floor right next to where the speeder was parked. Jao pivoted and shot him in the chest, knocking him over the speeder's low guard rail and into its shallow passenger hold. That was cargo they didn't need; they had to rescue Ania at least, and any of the Bothans if they were still alive. But especially Ania; Jao had dragged her into this and would never forgive himself if he couldn't get her out.

Jao jumped backward into the speeder, then called Val forward. The older man did the same, but as his feet landed a stray stun bolt took his shoulder. His lightsaber flicked off and fell from his hand; Jao struggled to catch him and keep him aboard while pounding the speeder's controls at the same time. With a jerk, it took to the air.

This vehicle was made for delivering cargo, not dodging blaster bolts or doing anything speedy. Val was awake but too weak to stand; Jao let him slump down next to the body of the trooper he'd shot and wrestled with the controls, increasing altitude and veering into a tight turn until he could see the construction droid Ania was supposed to be on. Then he powered the thing to full speed.

Then he saw another speeder, smaller and quicker, drop into view from above and head for the same target, and he knew full speed wasn't fast enough.

Ania saw the first speeder swoop down on her and felt a surge of hope; then she was the second, smaller vehicle trying to catch up behind it. That one was Jao's, which meant this nearer one was hostile. Snarling, she brought her rifle up and fired over the crown of the big droid's head, trying to knock that speeder from the air. Her first shot glanced off its forward

hull, sparking and scoring but leaving no damage. The speeder twisted to evade the second shot, and a body peeked out of its open-top hull and fired a spray of blue stun blasts. Ania twisted back under cover but there was no space she could hide. The speeder soared in from overhead and dropped altitude. She fired desperately up, spraying red bolts, but they failed to stab the black-armored body that jumped off the speeder and landed ten meters below, right beside her on the droid's shoulder.

Ania swung her rifle like a club. The long barrel connected to the soldier, slamming him into the bulk of the droid's head, but he already had his blaster drawn. Even as his helmet cracked on metal the pistol went off in his hand, taking Ania in the stomach point-blank. Numbness from her center spread out fast. Ania didn't feel the rifle fall from her grip and didn't feel her body fall out beneath her. By then it was already full dark.

Even as Jao wrestled the slow cargo speeder around the construction droid he knew it was too late. He spotted one black-armored soldier standing on the droid's shoulder, Ania's small form sprawled beneath it. At the same time someone from the other speeder began firing in his direction. Jao instinctively pushed his speeder to evade, but that got him farther from Ania.

Still pushing away, he grabbed his blaster and fired red shots at the speeder. These bolts sparks against its aft repulsorlift, sending out a plume of smoke. The speeder struggled to stay aloft but its pilot kept firing at Jao, scorching the hull of the skiff. This cargo hauler wasn't built for combat and had no armor to speak of; a few small-arms blasts would send him plunging into Coruscant's abyss and take Master Val with him.

He could only run, but if he ran he'd leave Ania behind.

Val decided for him. The older man, still half-numb from the stun blast, reared up and slammed on the speeder's controls. It swung skyward and climbed as fast as its modest engine could. Jao's blaster seemed to fire of its own volition, spewing angry futile shots at the other speeder.

None of it did any good. That second speeder dwindled far below, shrinking away to nothing and disappearing into blackness, just like Ania.

## Chapter Fourteen

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Sometimes Marin acutely missed mobility. Mostly she longed for *Starlight Champion*, the old Koensayr scout she'd inherited from her father and lost during Marasiah's rescue three years ago. Other times she felt nostalgic for *Fast Start*, the big cargo hauler she, Benet, and Ania had lived a simple life on. Every once in a while she even missed the ancient, refitted X-wing she'd used to traverse the galaxy during her first years as a Jedi Knight, though she knew her old body could never take that kind of cramped travel nowadays.

All those ships were gone now, variously destroyed in battle or sold for scrap, and her options were much more limited. Without her own ride, Marin was stuck on Milagro until someone came by to pick her up. She'd rebuffed K'Kruhk's offer to leave with him on his J-1 shuttle but was starting to regret that now. Her talents had never leaned toward botany and bio-forming, so she was of little good to the shapers. She tried to do more for Marasiah, but she could only do so much for a woman who didn't want to be helped.

When an apprentice shaper told her that a call was waiting for her in the comm center, Marin hurried over, hoping it was Ania announcing she was inbound. There were few other people who'd be calling her here.

Most of the shapers' settlement on Milagro was primitive, with buildings either constructed from wood or grown from Yuuzhan Vong biots. The one exception was the comm center, a stout metal shed topped by rotating transceiver disc. The Yuuzhan Vong tended to give it wide berth, preferring their



biotech, so it was empty when Marin stepped inside.

She tapped the console and opened up the connection. She was greeted not by her daughter's face but the conical metal head of an assassin droid.

With his usual unfailing politeness, AG-37 said, "Hello, Marin. I hope you've had a pleasant morning."

"Hello yourself. I'm impressed you calculated for local time."

"It was a minor task. When we last visited Milagro I made a point to index all astronomic data, including the pace of its solar revolutions."

"Well, now you're just showing off. Are you on *Free Agent*? Is Ania around?"

"Yes to the former, no to the latter. Ania and Jao Assam have embarked on a mission to Coruscant. I am tending to *Free Agent* on Druckenwell."

That meant they were far, far apart. Marin was frankly shocked; AG-37 usually followed her daughter like an oversized metal shadow. "Are Ania and Jao alright?"

"I... believe so." She heard the faint, human-like hesitation in his voice. "I am not privy to the status of their mission. It is a resistance affair."

Marin didn't like the sound of that. She respected the rebels' fortitude, but their struggle seemed doomed to failure, at least as long as Marasiah stayed in hiding. "A-gee, what are you calling me for?"

"I am, in fact, relaying a message from a third party, with whom you are also familiar. If you'll wait one moment, I will bring Sauk into the transmission."

The droid's holo-image flickered out, then reappeared with a partner. The bulbous-eyed Mon Calamari looked the same as she remembered; she hadn't seen him since he'd left to join the refugee settlement two years ago.

"Hello, Sauk," Marin said. "How are things on Bavinyar?"

"That's what I'm calling about," the Mon Cal explained. "I was trying to reach Ania or Jao... But actually, you might be better."

"And why is that?"

"We've been putting a lot of work into constructing underwater settlements here. I'm talking about massive cities for both Quarren and Mon Cals, the kind we used to have on

Dac. That means we've been doing a lot of surveys of the ocean. The humans and Cereans who already live here have done a lot of mining on the island chains on the southern hemisphere, but the oceans in the north are mostly unexplored, and that's where I've been working."

Marin had absolutely no idea where this was going. "And is there a problem?"

"Not a problem, exactly. In fact, it might be the opposite of a problem. It's better if I just show you."

Sauk's holo-image disappeared and was replaced by a topographic display. As Marin watched the display zoomed in on one area, apparently a selection of Bavinyar's ocean floor. As magnification increased so did image resolution, and Marin marked a four-sided pyramid shape halfway jutting out from the sediment.

she immediately thought of the Tho Yor that Cade Skywalker had encountered on Tython. She'd never seen the object herself but Skywalker had given her a vivid description of what the thing was like, inside and out. He'd told her about the soul of an ancient Je'daii that had been retained within its eight stone walls, and how that soul had guided him and Khat Lah both to Rohakalla and its hypergate.

If anything could help them recover the Force, Cade had said, it would have been the Tho Yor, but that monolith had been blasted to oblivion by one of Hogrum Chalk's star destroyers. They'd scoured the galaxy for three years, looking for any sign of another Tho Yor. Supposedly they'd once been many, but that was many thousands of years ago.

Marin reigned herself in. All she saw for sure was an unusual rock formation. "Sauk," she asked, "Has anyone gotten a closer look at that thing?"

"They have. That's why I've called you."

The holo changed again, this time to flat images apparently taken by a deep-water submersible. They showed lit-up sections of the pyramid surface, depicting rough rock covered with aggregate sediment and speckled by patches of plant and coral life. Yet there was something unnaturally regular about it; the slopes looked too smooth and symmetrical to have been created by erosion.

Then the holo flashed an image that decided everything.

Though patches had been overgrown, Marin could clearly make out a series of concentric wheels carved into the pyramid's face, two of which contained eight jutting spokes.

She knew the ancient Dai Bendu symbol on sight. Mouth dry, Marin asked, "How many people have seen this?"

"Only about twenty people, all members of the exploration team."

"Are they Federation people?"

"No, they're all local."

"Bavinyari?"

"Just Mon Cals and Quarren. A few humans. I don't think any of them know what it is they're seeing."

"But they know it's unusual. Sauk, you can't let word of this get out. Once Coruscant sees this thing- once *Chalk* sees it-"

"I know. I saw what happened at Tython."

"You need to cordon off that area somehow. Nobody else goes close. Nobody else sees those findings."

Sauk got flustered. "I'm not a... I don't have the authority..."

"Just find a way, Sauk. Fake an emergency or something. Just don't let anyone get close."

AG-37 pointed out, "That will, in itself, raise alarms with the Bavinyari government, and in turn with Coruscant."

Marin sighed. "Then direct the exploration someplace else. Just keep people away from that pyramid."

"I'll see what I can do," Sauk swallowed.

"Just protect it. A-gee-"

"You want passage to Bavinyar to see the pyramid yourself," the droid completed. "I expected that result and have pushed off Druckenwell in anticipation of your request. It should take me less than a standard day to reach Milagro, and from there approximately twenty hours to reach Bavinyar."

"I'm glad you're on top of things."

"As am I. Is there anything else you need us to do?"

Marin's mind raced, then settled on one thing, but Sauk and AG couldn't help her with it. "Not right now. Sauk, pass me your contact info so I can comm you directly if I have to."

"Of course. That's no problem."

"And if anything else comes, don't hesitate-"

"To contact you. I know."

Despite her stress, Marin smiled. She was proud of her

daughter for making such reliable friends. They'd helped her all they could. What she had to do next, she'd do alone.

The garden at the center of the settlement was modestly sized but lush, packed with flora colored green, yellow, violets, red and blue. Through careful attention of the shapers, plants of both native Milagran and Yuuzhan Vong origin shared the same soil and flourished. It was, Marasiah thought, a statement of hope as much as botanical skill.

Marasiah was in the garden when she felt Marin approaching, softly reaching for her in the Force. Marasiah responded with a brief affirmation but remained among the flowers for the older woman to find. When Marasiah felt her urgency, she braced herself for the worst.

What she got was totally unexpected. She stood there and listened without reply as Marin talked of the transmission she'd just received, the images she'd seen, and the ride that was coming to pick her up and whisk her away.

When she'd gotten everything out, Marin didn't ask Marasiah to come with her. She didn't have to. The question was plain. Marasiah didn't answer. All she could think about was one fact, repeating itself like a vicious drum pounding in her heart.

"Bavinyar," she said. The word was painful on her tongue. "They found it on *Bavinyar*?"

"We can't know for certain unless we go there," said Marin, "But the images I've seen are convincing."

*Bavinyar*. Marasiah couldn't wrap her mind around it. For three years the Jedi and their allies had scoured the galaxy for another Tho Yor, or anything else that might help them regain the Force. And for all that time, the object of their quest had been waiting for them on *Bavinyar*.

The planet Antares had died on. The planet she herself had selected as a suitable home for Dac's refugees. And now, three years later, those same refugees had uncovered what all those stubborn questing Jedi had not.

Why *Bavinyar*, of all the places? Was it stupid chance? Had the Force subtly nudged her, directing her without her thinking, and made her select *Bavinyar* out of all the ocean-worlds in the galaxy?

Was her husband's murder also part of the Force's plan?

Marasiah wanted to scream. She wanted to vomit. She spun away from Marin, hugged herself tight, tried to gather her thoughts and failed.

Marin projected subtle soothing through the Force, ineffectual. "Sauk is trying to hide the site from view," she explained, "But we won't be able to do that forever. Eventually other authorities will find out, and so will your uncle. But I think we'll be able to access it before that."

"*We?*" Marasiah choked.

"*I'm* going, at least. There's not many beings in the galaxy who can open up a Tho Yor."

"You have no idea what will be inside. That... spirit Skywalker said he'd talked to, that dead Je'daii... It might be there, it might not."

"You're right. We have no idea what will happen or if it will even help. But we have to go."

"Why?" Still hugging herself, Marasiah spun to face the old woman. "What does it *matter* to you? You're not a Jedi, not an Imperial Knight... You gave up on the Force almost fifty years ago!"

"Yes," Marin said calmly, "And that was a mistake."

"Why? Do you think you can *trust* the Force? If the Force really made me send refugees to Bavinyar, then the Force is responsible for everything *else* that happened. Do you understand that? The *Force* killed my husband! I hope my uncle finds that thing and blasts it on the ocean floor!"

Still infuriatingly soft, the old woman said, "You don't mean that."

Marasiah didn't know what she meant. She was shaking hard. All the meditation methods that had soothed her over the past three years did nothing now.

Voice creaking, she repeated her question. "What does it matter? Why can't you leave it be?"

Instead of answering, Marin took a long look around the garden and asked, "What do you know about your uncle Vitor? Your father's brother."

"I know who he was. I know he was killed by Sith before I was born."

"But what did Roan tell you about him?"

Marasiah didn't understand why she was asking. It took effort

to veer her thoughts from Bavinyar and Antares. "He said Vitor was... a mentor to him. He admired his brother very much. He was crushed when he died."

"What else?"

She tried to remember, not just her father's words but the feeling he'd emanated in the Force. "I think he... envied his brother. Not for dying, but while he was alive, my father was jealous of him for being older, stronger, more sure of himself. He always assumed Vitor would be emperor, not him."

"That's right," Marin said, "But Vitor didn't think so."

Marasiah stared at that old woman, that fugitive Fel who'd walked into her life three years ago after decades of absence. She was the only link to the rest of her family now; the only one who might remember.

"Vitor saw visions in the Force," Marin explained. Her voice ached with old pain. "They always came true. Always. He saw his death and he raged against it. He hated the Force and everything to do with it, but in the end he accepted it, and his destiny."

"To die on a Sith's blade."

"To save Allana Djo and liberate Hapes." Marin's eyes were hollow, like she was staring back in time at the killing thrust. "He told me not to regret it as he died. But I did. I resented the Force for decades. I ran from it when I shouldn't have... but at the time it was so painful I thought running was the only thing I could do."

"The Force didn't warn Antares he was about to die. It didn't *consult* anyone. It just *did* it."

"If that's what happened, but I don't think it did. The Sith killed Antares, but the Sith are gone. You can't take your anger out on them."

Marasiah had already, grudgingly, accepted that. For the third time she asked, "What does it matter to you what happens to that thing on Bavinyar?"

Marin looked up at the sky. "Life is a strange thing. You can't really understand it when you're as young as you are."

"Don't patronize me," Marasiah snarled.

"I'm not. What I meant is that when you're young, it's easy to make your life into a story. It's short and simple enough to make cause and effect. And you get older and it spools larger.

It gets harder to find a path and purpose in anything.”

“Do you have a point?”

“I’ve lived a lot of different lives and told myself different stories. The Force has been the one thing tying them together, even when I pushed it away.” She gained a small, wistful smile. “Another thing about getting older is that you look harder for a *why* to things, even when you know you probably won’t get it.”

“You want to understand.”

“It’s that simple.”

Marasiah breathed deeply, the first step of calming herself. She was no longer shaking but her heart beat fast; the garden seemed unsteady around her. “You can do what you want. Go to Bavinyar. Try and reawaken the Force. Get enlightenment. I won’t stop you.”

“But you’ll stay here.”

She swallowed. “I don’t want to see Bavinyar again, ever. You have to understand that.”

“I do. I respected it.” After a pause Marin asked, “I’m not sure if I want to leave *you* alone, though.”

“I can take care of myself.” Marin’s look and Force-aura said she wasn’t sure. Marasiah insisted, “I can. You’ve taught me how to... contain my anger.” By emptying it into a void.

“There’s still plenty of time before *Free Agent* gets here. I can help you meditate, if you want.”

“Maybe. But for now, I’d like to be alone. Please.”

Marin nodded, sent a little weak comfort through the Force, then stepped away. Marasiah watched her disappear among the flowers and fronds. When she was gone she finally let herself drop to a crouch, elbows on knees, hands on her head. She let fingers drifts through tangled brown hair and remembered how she’d madly torn out her regal white-dyed locks after the attack on the *Alliance*. That mark of royalty had seemed like a stain and she’d done anything to be rid of it.

There was no point in tearing out hair now. It would help nothing. She let her hands fall from the brown curtain, stared into the dirt, and wondered whether she wanted Marin to succeed or to fail.

Azlyn Rae rendezvoused with her teacher’s freighter in deep space, on the outskirts of the Savareen sector. The ungainly

ship had a boxy, broad-mouthed hangar large enough to swallow her Twintail fighter and fit it snugly inside. It wasn't a pretty arrangement but it was an effective one; as often and she and Rasi Tuum were travelling the galaxy together they also travelled apart. The Twintail allowed Azlyn to run plenty of solo missions, some of which were, thankfully, more successful than her friendly visit to Maridun.

"Shado didn't budge," Azlyn said simply after clambering down from the fighter to the hangar floor.

"It was to be expected," Master Tuum said.

The Cathar, towering and over twice Azlyn's mass, stood before her in his brown Jedi garb. Some knights and masters had chosen to given up their robes, their lightsabers, or like Shado, their very roles as Jedi. Rasi Tuum had given up nothing, and Azlyn admired him for it. He'd chosen to act that way not out of denial or stubbornness but hope, which was in short supply nowadays.

"I was hoping it would go better," she admitted as she pulled her flight helmet off. "It's not that he doesn't want the Force anymore, no matter what he says. It's that he doesn't trust himself."

"It's a grievous wound he's suffered," Tuum said. "And he's hardly the only one to be so injured."

That was sadly true. Azlyn's mind flicked to Marasiah, and then to Ganner. She didn't even know where the former empress was hiding, but Marasiah's reaction to betrayal and loss had been to withdraw from the galactic. Ganner, by contrast, had thrown himself into the rebels' hopeless battle to save a galaxy that didn't want their help.

And Azlyn had settled into a middle ground. She'd often wondered why that was. As a Force-user she'd felt split between her past as a Jedi and present as an Imperial Knight. When the Force and those old orders gone all she had to follow was the feelings inside her. She was surprised to find how clear her own desires were, once she could be herself alone.

She had to forget Shado for now, and with a sigh she asked, "Do we have someplace else to go next? Someplace with a little more potential?"

"I believe you may find just what you desire. Come with me."



Tuum turned and beckoned her to follow with a wagging claw. Leaving her helmet with the ship. Azlyn followed him out of the hangar, past the freighter's modest cabin space and up to the cockpit. The Cathar bent over the comm console and tapped a button, bringing up a blue holo-image.

"Less than two hours ago, I received a message from Master K'Kruhk. These images he relayed were originally taken on Bavinyar."

Azlyn bent close to see the cycle of images. First was a three-dimensional topographic map, apparently of an ocean floor. The map zoomed in and her eyes marked a surprisingly regular-looking pyramid-shape jutting out from a flat plain, probably miles beneath the surface.

Next were two-dimensional photos of the pyramid itself. Her breath caught as she saw the sheer slanted sides and the Dai Bendu roundels emblazoned on them.

"A Tho Yor? *There?*"

"One of the refugee settlement teams discovered it while mapping an uncharted part of the ocean. K'Kruhk is en route to the site but we are closer. He suggests we make our way there."

*Suggest* was a mild word. "Fine by me. But they say you need the Force to touch that thing."

"K'Kruhk says that is being taken care of."

She looked up at him. "Cade?"

"He implied another."

The list of active Force-users in the galaxy were damned slim. If not Cade- and yes, she was disappointed not to see him- it could be Khat Lah and his Yuuzhan Vong. It could be Kyra, though she was off with Ganner and the rebels. It could be Ania Solo's mother, that enigmatic ex-Jedi.

It could even be Marasiah, though Azlyn doubted it. *Bavinyar*. She could still remember the taste of salt water in her mouth and the color of the setting sun. If she closed her eyes she could even replay the moment when that sniper's bolt had taken Antares through the chest.

Of all the planets in the galaxy, the Tho Yor had been on that one all the time. Azlyn didn't want to know what Marasiah would feel when she learned the news.

"My ship's in the barn," she told Rasi Tuum. "How about we get going?"

“I thought you’d say as much,” said the Cathar, and he bared sharp canines for a hungry grin.

Azlyn felt hungry too. More, she felt light and filled with energy. There were still plenty of dangers, especially if Chalk found out about the Tho Yor, and even if someone entered it this would probably be just the start of a longer journey. But it was a start.

Together she and her old master plotted the course and swung their freighter on its right heading. The starlines exploded and fast light carried them to old tragedy and new hope.

## Chapter Fifteen

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She didn't look like much, but she was one of the most dangerous beings in the galaxy.

That was how it seemed to Hogrum Chalk as he peered at the holo-feed from the stark white interrogation room where Ania Solo sat bound to her chair. After devoting considerable resources to the matter, he'd determined this woman was the daughter of Marin Fel, herself first cousin to Roan Fel. Marin had once been a Jedi before foreswearing that for a civilian life. Ania had apparently been raised thinking there was nothing special about her family line, though recent associations with her mother, Marasiah Fel, and Cade Skywalker all indicated she'd become quite aware.

Ania Solo was a Skywalker. That alone made her an agent of chaos. Nothing in Hogrum's research had indicated this woman could use the Force, as her mother and distant cousins could, but he'd spared no precaution and moved the prisoner to a specially prepared cell located next to a chamber in which several ysalamiri had, at some expense, been nurtured for the past three years.

Hogrum was a man who prepared, and he'd needed to be ready in case he ever snared one of the galaxy's last Force-users. Or in case Eli Horn became too hard to control.

He'd not expected to use it on Ania Solo, of all candidates. He was sure the woman was cut off from the Force, if she had it at all, but that wasn't making interrogation easier. Solo's face was smeared by sweat that snared strands of black hair against her cheeks. She was breathing hard, and her right hand, wrist strapped to chair-arm, clenched and unclenched. From the

holo he could see muscles bunch and veins bulge where the interrogator droid, still hovering before her as a black ominous sphere, had injected Solo with a mildly hallucinogenic truth-telling drug.

Hogrum listened as the droid's tinny voice recited the questions it had been ordered to ask. "What is the current location of your mother, Marin Fel?"

Solo twitched but the chair's bonds held her tight. Her jaw shook but she said, "Don't know anyone by that name."

"What is the current location of Cade Skywalker?"

"I... don't know... What do I look like? His... mother?"

"Name all the compatriots who accompanied you on your mission to Coruscant."

That one she couldn't dismiss flippantly. The drug wasn't totally useless after all. Hogrum watched as her head lolled from one side to the other and back again, a slow-motion headshake. Her eyelids flickered; she licked drying lips and said, "I didn't get... all their names."

"Name all the compatriots who accompanied you on your mission to Coruscant," the droid repeated.

"I came with... came to get... Yalta Val..." The words seemed wrenched out of her. At least the drugs were having some effect.

"Who came with you to extract Yalta Val?"

Solo bit her lip to keep herself from speaking. White teeth drew red blood, vivid in the bright light. Finally she said, "Val... Yalta Val... Did you... get him?"

After a pause for cogitation the droid declared, "I am not authorized to answer that question."

"Well... I'm not authorized.... to answer yours."

"Who came with you to extract Yalta Val?"

Solo twisted her head again, back and forth, back and forth. Finally she admitted, "Re'leir... Bothans... three others... don't know names. I'm not... really... not a resistance member..."

"If you are not a part of the resistance why were you seeking extract Yalta Val?"

"I just wanted to.... ah, *shab*, I was just... just helping... helping a friend..."

"What is the name of your friend?"

She twisted again, bit her lip, and drew more blood. A straight line of it was running onto her chin. "Jao Assam. I came... for Jao Assam."

It was something, but Hogrum had already guessed as much. Solo was a known associate of Assam, and Assam was a former pupil of Val's. Likely Assam had been the one who'd turned Val traitor in the first place. And if Solo truly had come to Coruscant just to watch out for her friend- and that seemed to fit her personality profile of erratic decisions, based on personal motivations rather than ideological ones- then she had little else to tell them.

He tapped the control panel beneath the holo-projection and spoke directly to the droid. "Ask her about Marasiah Fel."

As prompted, the droid's cool voice said, "What is the current location of Marasiah Fel?"

Solo twisted again. She was holding something in, and Hogrum tensed in anticipation and fear, but in the end she said, "Dead... She's... dead. Dust and ashes."

"Describe the specific circumstances of her death."

"Marasiah... She... got blown up... Her... apartment, got blown up. Big news. Big fancy funeral... That's all I know."

Solo had helped break Marasiah out of prison. That was fact. Even with the drug she was putting out lies. Frustrated, Hogrum told the droid, "Repeat the last request exactly."

So the droid said, "Describe the specific circumstances of her death."

Solo gnawed the corner of her mouth, and words came out slurred. "Got blown up... On *Alliance*... those *shabuire* bombed it... massacred it... karking bastards..."

"Again," Hogrum growled, and the droid repeated its request a third time.

Solo's hands clenched to fists and released, several times over. She gnawed the other side of her mouth, drawing blood, as she said, "Bastards... Shooting down escape pods... Criminals... *shabuire*..."

The droid's voice sounded in Hogrum's dark observation chamber. "The patient seems to be losing awareness. Efficacy of this session is decreasing rapidly."

It had never been that effective to begin with. Hogrum told it, "Stand by. Do not ask the patient more questions."

“Understood.”

Hogrum sighed and stared at the holo. Solo still twitched in her chair and dark blood-streaks ran down her white chin; the black interrogation droid hovered motionless before her. Even without the Force, the woman was impressively willful. In truth, he'd expected an outcome like this, which was why he'd brought a partner to watch the interrogation.

Turning to Eli Horn he said, “I think this requires a personalized touch. Can you do that?”

The young man nodded. “I'll need you to remove the ysalamir from the adjacent chamber.”

“Of course. We'll allow a short time for the effect of the drugs to recede. Are you sure you can pry out whatever she'd got in her mind?”

Eli stared at the woman's image and said, “I guarantee it.”

He stepped alone into the interrogation chamber and looked down in the prison. It occurred to Eli that he'd never shared words with Ania Solo and only met her briefly, four years earlier during the mission to Te Hasa. They said he couldn't use the Force, now or ever, despite having Skywalker blood. Eli didn't know if that true, but he was about to find out. The ysalamir from the nearby room had been taken away. It was just him, her, and the Force.

The drugs had worn off to some extent. Though she slumped in her chair as much as the wrist- and ankle-bindings would allow, she pushed herself straight when he saw him enter. Blood was drying on her chin, a thick red line running from the side of the lip down, and her face gleamed with sweat. She blinked her eyes clear as she looked up at him. He could imagine himself through her vision: a figure in black, looming, threatening violence and pain.

It wasn't the fate he'd envisioned for himself, but as one of the few beings left with the Force he couldn't shirk its awful responsibilities. To keep the Force silent, he'd do things he didn't want to, including falling back on teaching the Sith had instilled in him.

Forcing secrets from an unwilling mind was one of those.

Staring up at him, Ania Solo said, “You... I know you.”

“We met only once.”

“Eli Horn. I’ve... heard things about you. Not very good.”

“Which sources? Kyra?”

“Mostly.”

“Where is Kyra now?” She didn’t answer right away. He added, “I have ways of making you talk, much more effective than drugs and a clumsy droid. They’ll work even on a mind as stubborn as yours. You know that, don’t you?”

Her blood-smeared lips twisted in a sneer. “You going to talk, *shabuir*, or are you going to bring it?”

Eli took a moment to prepare himself, and then he brought it. A black-gloved hand lashed out; palm pressed onto her pale forehead and he reached out with the Force to scour the mind inside. He looked for a simple thing: Kyra. He pictured the young woman he’d fought to a draw on Praxal VII, the one he’d scarred across the cheek, the one he’d spent uncountable days travelling with on that Force-invested world, slowly coming to rely and trust and understand each other even as they were compelled to opposite ends.

Opposite, yet so similar. They both believed their powers invested them with responsibility that couldn’t be refused. They were both willing to pursue their desired end regardless of where it took them, and what shades of the Force they used.

But Eli had been Sith, and he knew to avoid the arrogance and rage that had empowered and doomed them. With cold, emotionless precision, he pursued the memories of Kyra. He found the woman pulled through *Free Agent’s* airlock during the escape from Praxal VII and followed that memory forward in time until he found her again, standing on the freighter’s back as it sat parked in some warship’s expansive hangar.

He pressed for a name. *Paramount*. That was one of the rebels’ larger ships. He searched for a location but found nothing. A rendezvous in dead space, days ago. The rebel fleet could be sulking anywhere now. A dead end. Chalk would not be pleased, but not surprised either.

Still linking his mind with Ania’s, Eli continued to scour. He pictured another face- Cade’s Skywalker’s- and chased it. This one was harder, and he sensed Ania hadn’t met with Skywalker for quite some time.

Frustrated, he searched for another: Khat Lah. The Yuuzhan Vong he knew well; he could picture the weathered unscarred

face, the gentle eyes with capacity for violence. Another dead end; he couldn't find Khat Lah anywhere inside her.

So he fell to the next one, the one Chalk most wanted to find. He'd met Marasiah Fel only briefly, but the regal woman was easy to conjure. As he sought her in Ania's memory he felt Ania trying to evade, like an animal chased by a hungry carnivore. She knew what he was after and was trying to hide it, and that whetted his appetite.

He pursued Ania further down her memories. He found Marasiah Fel, facing Ania from behind a desk, dressed in the crown and white splendor of an empress. He found her again, smeared with sweat and blood, dressed in loose white pajamas, staggering into the cockpit of a starship.

Ania tried to evade. He wrestled her to submission. Peeling away the walls her stubborn, untrained mind erected, he found Marasiah Fel again, but this woman was a new one, barely recognizable. The white streak in her hair, mark of the Fel monarchs, was gone. She seemed small, withdrawn into herself. Her eyes were like empty pits but it was still her.

*Where?* Eli searched for a location. He looked at Marasiah's surroundings: lush forests, wooden buildings, some planet forgotten by the sweep of history. Around her, visible in memory but absent from the Force: Yuuzhan Vong. Not Khat Lah's warriors and mystics but shapers.

Eli understood. Marasiah was in hiding with Yuuzhan Vong, not on Zonama Sekot- which was still in quarantine, lost in the Unknown Regions- but on one of the planets ruined by the Ossus Project, where even now the shapers worked in secret, trying undo the Sith sabotage that had turned them into pariahs.

There were a hundred such worlds she could be on. Eli forced himself deeper into Ania's mind, looking for one simple name. She resisted, putting up walls again.

Eli compelled her. Like Talon had taught him too, he attacked her with raw physical pain. He was already in her mind; it was an easy thing to do. As he clutched her forehead he felt her writhe, twist, and moan in agony.

"Tell me," he panted aloud, "Tell me the planet!"

She thrashed in the chair but he grasped her head, pouring more pain into her, until her bloody lips parted and she spoke for the first time since his mind-probe began.



“Milagro,” she gasped.

Three short syllables. He knew them to be true. Eli released her and staggered back. Ania, still bound tight to her chair, panted and squeezed eyes shut, as though that could banish all Eli’d done to her. He looked down at his black-gloved hand and felt filthy. But he had it: the information Chalk craved and feared.

Without another word, Eli turned and walked out of the chamber. Chalk loomed in the hallway beyond. The black-garbed, one-eyed man stared at Eli hard.

“Milagro,” Eli said. “Marasiah Fel is at Milagro. She’s in hiding with a group of Yuuzhan Vong shapers.”

Though he kept it off his half-scarred, half-metal face, Eli could feel the anxiety and anticipation in Chalk. His firm voice said, “You must go there. Personally.”

Eli had expected that. “I’ll need backup.”

“You’ll have the very best. Kill the shapers and anyone who gets in your way.”

“And Marasiah?”

“Unless you’re absolutely certain you can capture her safely... kill her. But I’ll expect a body either way.”

He could tell Hogrum had warred over those orders for years, all the while anticipating today. Despite his ruthlessness, despite the cold black stone of his heart, a part of the regent still cared about his niece, the last living member of his family. But he was willing to sacrifice her to do what had to be done.

Eli understood that and respected it. After all, they walked this road together.

Jao had experienced dawn on Coruscant many times, but never like this. The eastern sky smoldered and the sun’s disc peeked between towers on the horizon, draping long, long shadows as it rose. He and Yalta Val hid in one of those dark places, tucked between a rooftop and a ventilator tube, lying flat on their bellies and facing the Westport docking complex from two kilometers away.

Two kilometers was enough. Jao hadn’t lost his set of macrobinoculars in the fray, which was one small blessing. Master Val had recovered from the stun bolt that had paralyzed his left side; another boon.

None of that compared to the fact that Ania was gone. Captured, most likely, perhaps even now being brutally interrogated by Hogrum Chalk. The knowledge sickened Jao; it was exactly what he'd been afraid might happen. He kept replaying the crucial last moments of their escape in his head, kept seeing Ania's prone and helpless body whenever he closed his eyes. Even when they'd fled into the night, ditched their slow cargo skiff and stolen a faster speeder bike, he'd kept thinking about her.

Master Val didn't need the Force to sense his stress. Calmly the older Knight said, "You can't do anything for her now. Just focus on the landing zone."

He was right, of course. Jao brought the binoculars to his eyes and stared toward the sunrise. Hidden in shadow the glare wasn't bad, but the growing light in the sky made Westport itself seem darker. He scanned the docking pads around the edge and tried to spot the shuttle they'd ridden in from *Paramount* on. He was near-certain he was facing the right section of the port, but between the distance and the bad lighting it was hard to know for sure.

And then he found it: one pale shuttle, twin wings folded up to a peak. As soon as he saw it his heart fell. Small figures in white moved around it: stormtroopers. Someone had traced them back to that ship. Maybe they'd used security cams, maybe they'd gotten the info from a captured Bothan. Maybe they'd wrenched it from Ania herself. It didn't matter. Their exit strategy was gone.

"I take it that's nothing good," remarked Val.

Jao lowered the binoculars. "Stormtroopers have it locked down."

"Was anyone minding the shuttle?"

"No. And its nav computer is set to erase at the first sign of unauthorized access. That part should be okay."

"But we have no place to run."

"Not exactly."

As he regarded his teacher one more small boon occurred to Jao. They'd shaken their pursuers five hours ago and nobody had caught up to them since, which probably meant nobody had placed a tracker on Val.

That, or they were waiting for him to lead them the safehouse.

He'd avoided telling Val about that place. It wasn't because he didn't trust his master, though paranoid thoughts still nagged him. They'd simply had the bigger concerns of running and hiding. That, and his mind kept drawing him back to Ania.

With the shuttle out of the picture, there was only one option left. Jao had a comlink but he'd only used it once so far, to warn Saaraï that the mission had gone belly-up. Chalk's people had found their midnight rendezvous, they'd found the shuttle, and they'd taken key prisoners. They might be at the safehouse now, or they might have gotten to Saaraï and even Senator Gahan.

Everything could already be wrecked beyond repair, and that knowledge could be just a tap of the comlink away. But the only other option was to hide in Coruscant's underbelly forever, so Jao turned on the comm and hailed Saaraï.

He waited several long heartbeats, then heard a voice say: "This is Lenoa Aress of Aquatic Access. If this is about last week's fundraising, I'm afraid the results are confidential."

That was the code phrase signaling everything was all right on her end. Jao allowed a sigh of relief. "It's me, Saaraï. I have Yalta Val with me."

"Oh, that's good."

"Good but not great. We're overlooking Westport. The shuttle's been locked down by stormtroopers. Where are you?"

"I'm at the safehouse. The *new* safehouse. When you told me Ania had been captured, our agents moved me to a new location."

"Smart precaution. You're sure nobody'll come knocking?"

"Even I didn't know about this place until two hours ago. It's a bit further out, in one of the new apartment complexes by the Western Sea."

"Understood. We'll head out that way and comm you again when we're closer."

"Good. What are you travelling on? Not the skiff?"

"No, we stole a speeder bike."

"Then stay in the traffic lanes and don't draw attention to yourself. Don't hurry. Just get here safely."

"All right." Jao hesitated; he knew what the answer would be but he couldn't keep himself from asking, "Anything new on Ania?"

"I'm sorry. We just don't have enough people in Galactic City to track everything, especially Chalk's FSB agents. We have no idea where she is... and realistically, we probably won't anytime soon."

Or ever. Frustration smoldered; he squeezed the metal comlink hard. Gruffly he said, "I understand. We'll see you soon."

He turned off the comm and looked at Val. There was aching compassion on his face, and for once Jao wished his old master wasn't so perceptive.

But because he was perceptive, Val knew not to pry. "It sounds like we'd better get going," he said.

"Sounds like," Jao agreed, and began crawling backward toward the rooftop edge where they'd parked the speeder bike. "Did you hear where we're going?" he asked.

"Somewhere by the Western Sea," said Val.

"She'll give us the specific address when we get closer. For safety's sake."

"I know how it works. And Jao?"

"Yes?"

Val gave him an encouraging smile. "You've done enough for now. This time, I'll drive."

## Chapter Sixteen

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The process of putting R2-D2's memories back together had given Cade a new appreciation for the patience of droids. Over his long lifetime, the little astromech had designated thousands of memories as critical. Cade had spent hours in Guri's lab, watching R2's recordings of himself and helping the droid arrange them in order. It was frequently awkward- there were a lot of things R2 had remembered that he'd like to forget- and Cade was glad that Deliah and Jariah mostly left him alone for the work.

When they'd more or less ordered the past seven years, Cade handed the work over to C-3PO. He and R2-D2 spent over a full standard day in the lab, working without need for food or rest, while Cade joined his partners on *Mynock*. Last time here they'd splurged on the Thrumble Foundation's luxurious guest accommodations, but nowadays they had to be tighter with credits and slept aboard the ship.

So, when the call came in, Cade was right there to answer it. The designator on *Mynock*'s comm board marked it as coming from *Free Agent*, so he expected to see Ania's face, but instead the older, sharper one of her mother.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Cade told Marin. "What's the occasion?"

"Cade, right now I'm on my way to Bavinyar with AG-37."

He recalled that Ania's companion Sauk had left *Free Agent* a few years back and settled down with the water-world's refugees. "Where's Ania and Jao?"

"Coruscant. They're off running some mission for the resistance."

Those brave, hopeless fools, Cade thought. "Are they okay?"

"I don't know. In the Force I feel..." Marin shook her head. "I'm just not sure."

That certainly wasn't comforting. Cade thought, hoped, that if something bad happened to any of the remaining Skywalkers he'd sense it. It wasn't like the Force had anything better to do lately.

"Well, why are you going to Bavinyar? Something to do with Sauk?"

"In a way." She leaned a little closer. "Cade, I think he's found a Tho Yor."

He stared. "On *Bavinyar*?"

"Buried on the ocean floor. The refugee administration found it when they were mapping an unused area."

"On *Bavinyar*."

"Yes. Cade, I told Sauk to stall and try to keep people from the area. Right now, the Bavinyari government doesn't know about it, but when they do, word will make its way to Coruscant."

"But nobody's gonna know what they're looking at, will they? It's not like Chalk's put out an all-points bulletin for *vermo* Force pyramids."

"I know, but if he *does* see those maps he'll know exactly what he's looking at. And then—"

"Right, I get it." Cade still remembered the site of the Tho Yor on Tython, reduced to a smoldering wreck in the glassed snowfield. Though they'd arrived hours after its destruction, its death-agonies had lingered in the Force.

"I'm on my way to Bavinyar now," Marin said. "I've called K'Kruhk and he's letting the Jedi know. A-gee picked me up from Milagro so it's not a long ride."

Milagro. Cade knew Nei Rin was there, still working to undo the Sith sabotage of the Ossus Project. The ex-empress was there too, helping or hiding, depending on how you looked at it.

"Marasiah come with you?" he asked.

"She said she wanted no part of it," Marin said grimly.

It was frustrating how she was sitting things out, but Cade knew that you had to work through your problems yourself, in your own way and on your own time. He asked Marin, "When you get to Bavinyar, how far do you plan to go?"

"As far as I can," she said seriously. "There's no telling how long we have before Chalk finds out about it."

Cade sighed. "Listen, I told you what happened when I went inside that thing."

"I know. There's no telling if it will work the same here, and only one way to find out."

What she intended was plain. Cade wanted to talk her out of it, but he knew there wouldn't be much of a point. Like her kid, Marin made up her mind and stuck with it.

"Just be careful," he said. "I'll come and help as soon as I can, but I'm on Esseles right now. Days out."

"I understand, but I can't wait for you."

"I get it. Just be *careful*."

Marin's smile was tight, somewhat amused. Cade admitted those words were kinda funny, coming from him.

"I'll see you when I see you," Marin said, and closed the link.

Cade sunk back in the cockpit chair and let the weight of that finally slam into him. The Jedi, Khat Lah's Vong, *Free Agent* and even *Mynock* had scoured the stars for years, looking for the hint of a Tho Yor or anything else that might lead them back to the Force. And all the while one had been on Bavinyar, a planet in the center of the galaxy's eye thanks to Marasiah's refugee relocation plan.

The Force had a twisted sense of humor. Cade laughed once, dryly. He knew Marasiah wasn't laughing at all.

It was the kind of thing best not to think about too hard. Cade went down from the cockpit to the hold, where he found Jariah and Deliah and told them about his conversation.

"*E chu ta*, didn't see that one coming," Jariah shook his head. "Does this mean we're heading to Bavinyar?"

Deliah added, "Tell me you're not planning on taking another trip into that pyramid-thing, Cade."

"Yes we are, and no, I'm not. Marin seems eager for the ride and she's going there first. But this is still something we should be there for." Because you never knew what would happen, and because things could get dangerous anytime. And because, for better or worse, he was a Skywalker and he could do things hardly anybody else could.

"What does that mean for our trip down memory lane?" asked Jariah.

“We might have to take it with us. I’m gonna go check on ‘em now.”

Cade traipsed out of *Mynock* and back into the Thrumble Foundation complex. He asked around but it still took him a while to find Guri among its gleaming halls and clean rooms.

“I’ve done all I can for Artoo,” she said when he cornered her outside a droid reassembly chamber, where some other automaton was getting a work-over. “His short-term memory processing is stable, which means he had a clear idea of what *now* is and should be able to perform basic required functions. As for arranging his long-term critical memories, that’s something he’s going to have to do himself. With your help.”

“Right now Threepio’s putting stuff in order for him.”

“Threepio has large gaps in his memory.”

“Well, I wasn’t even alive for most of that time.”

She tilted her head. “But you can still help fill in gaps related to the Skywalker family.”

Cade sighed. “I’ll see what I can do. We’ve got a long trip ahead of us so I guess we can keep working.”

“Good.” The human replica droid’s smile was so fond. “Feel free to comm me if any problems come up.”

Cade thanked her and made his way to the workroom where C-3PO and R2-D2 been strolling down memory lane nonstop for over a standard day. When he stepped into the chamber both droids turned photoreceptors on him, as though surprised.

“Ah, Master Cade, what pleasant timing,” chimed C-3PO. “I believe you may be of assistance right now.”

Cade wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. “What kind of assistance?”

“Why, compiling Artoo’s memories, of course. I’ve been doing my best to help him order experiences in which I, myself, am a participant, and despite some gaps in my early recollection I’ve helped him, in turn, identify other prominent figures in his memories, including your illustrious ancestor, Luke Skywalker.”

“That’s great, Threepio. Where do you need me?”

“Well, sir, we’ve started running into memories that I cannot corroborate. I was, after all, separated from Artoo and barely functional for nearly a century, and as such—”

“You need other help. I get that.” He looked between the two



droids. "Listen, guys, something's come up and we have to get moving. You can keep up the whole recollection session once we're in hyperspace."

R2 gave a disappointed hoot. C-3PO said, "We understand, sir, and if the need is urgent we will of course comply. Nonetheless, R2 was hoping you could fill in one piece which, he believes, will allow him to auto-compile more memories."

"All right. But just one, got it? We've gotta get moving."

"Of course, Master Cade." C-3PO turned to his counterpart. "Go ahead, Artoo. Show him the recording."

Despite his insistence, the astromech seemed hesitant. Yet after a few quick warbles, the holo-projector lit bright and a blue image appeared before Cade. Shot, as usual, from R2's waist-high angle, it was difficult at first to make sense of the figures. He saw a woman with dark braided hair, viewing in profile, but the face was unfamiliar. Another figure in Jedi robes had his back turned and a third, also male and in Jedi robes, was holding something in his arms and looking down.

The figures shifted, and Cade got a better look. The thing in the man's arms was a baby, tiny and wrapped tight. The man looked about Cade's age now, though his hair was darker. It was hard to tell from the holo's blue tint, but it might have been the same red as his father's.

The third figure turned as well, bringing face into view. Cade knew that face, though it was older here than the one he'd seen in his Force-visions. The face was weighed by time and half-eclipsed by gray beard, but the holo captured those blue eyes perfectly.

"That old guy," Cade said, "Is Luke Skywalker."

Artoo tootled and C-3PO said, "We have already determined that much, Master Cade. After all, Master Luke figures quite prominently in Artoo's memories. We also believe that the other male in the picture is--"

"Ben Skywalker." Cade could barely remember seeing holos of his great-grandfather. He leaned close, searching the record face for familiar structure. He saw a lot of his father in it. "That makes the woman... Katia Torrald. His wife. And the baby... that's gotta be my grandma. That's Jade Skywalker."

"Excellent! Did you hear that, Artoo? That explains a great deal."

The droid rocked eagerly. The holo winked out but was replaced by a new one. It showed the woman Katia again, sitting on the floor of some room so she was eye-level with the camera. She had a little sandy-haired girl in her arms, standing upright and squirming in her mother's embrace.

Cade's memory was shaky, but he knew his great-grandmother had died when Jade was pretty young, yet another part of the Skywalker clan claimed in the endless war with the Sith. For all he knew this might have been one of their last days together.

It was hard not to think of his father. His mother too, and his uncle, his grandma, his grandfather he'd never known and so much more. History always asked too damned much of the Skywalkers. Cade's chest clenched and he said, "Okay, I get it, that's Katia and Jade. Listen, I said we had to get moving and I meant it."

Artoo tweeted affirmative. The holo shut off and, to his relief, was not replaced by another. Cade had a feeling he'd have plenty more to see before they reached Bavinyar.

When Khat Lah had suggested Talon contemplate the void, he'd implied it should have been easy. He was right; it should have. She'd been staring into it for the past four years. Nonetheless she revolted at the sight of it; for her the absence of the Force meant the absence of everything. Yet they had several days to spend inside the Dai Bendu monastery, and Talon tried to make something of them.

The monks had meditation caves where they extinguished all flames and rolled a stone over the entrance, sealing themselves in total darkness and silence. A little reluctantly, Talon agreed to try the experience. The Sith had similar isolation exercises but then, of course, she'd had the Force to draw on. She'd been able to gather inward strength and project it onto the nothing around her, in effect becoming the void. Without the Force the void ate into her. Darkness and silence seemed to seep through her skin and into her body, absorbing all she was. She felt cold, as if all her inner warmth was being snuffed out. As if she was already dying a physical death, to match the spiritual one she'd already succumbed to.

Talon reminded herself it was all in her head, yet when she

willed her legs to unfold and carry her off the stone on which she sat, they refused to move. Her arms refused to lift; her body defied her commands. The quicker beat of her heart was the only indication she was not fully dead.

Since losing the Force she'd had several opportunities to die. Each time she'd backed away. When she'd had the Sith and the Force, death had meant nothing to her, but now she was terrified, perhaps because she knew a little better what it meant to be extinguished. The emptiness she knew in life was just a foretaste of the final one, and she hated both kinds. She craved strength and purpose; oblivion stole those from her forever.

With great will, Talon opened her mouth and called, saying she was done with the exercise. Her voice was like a thunder-crack in the sealed cave. It seemed to echo off rough walls for an eternity before the stone rolled away. Some light spilled into the cave and this time when she tried to move her limbs she could. Placing boots on the ground she stood up, stretched her limbs, and felt satisfaction as feeling returned. She was alive; still without the Force, but still alive.

She turned to exit, but a Talid's robed form filled the threshold. It held a torch with one hand, and firelight flickered on the long gray beard and red vestment of the high priest, Ten-Abu Donba. That surprised Talon; the old monk had avoided the pilgrims since their arrival. At least, he'd avoided her.

Talon waited for him to speak as he shuffled into the cave. He lowered himself to his haunches, the Talid version of a comfortable squat, and said, "Be seated, please."

"I have finished my exercise," she said.

"I know," said the priest. "Do you know how long you were in isolation for? Eleven standard minutes."

It had felt like much, much longer. She admitted, "The process was difficult."

"So I gather. I have talked with Khat Lah about your situation, but I would like to hear more from you."

She rankled but sat back on the stone. "Ask."

"Are you Sith?"

She hadn't expected such bluntness. That meant he wanted a plain answer in turn. "I was Sith... but there are no more Sith."

"So you are not Sith."

"No." It still tasted bitter.

"Then what are you, Talon?"

She'd been over this with Khat Lah many times. She was not *what* anymore, just a *who*, and she had no idea who she was.

"I am no *what*," she said. "I am nothing."

The monk shook his shaggy head. "You breathe air. You speak. Your heart beats. You are alive. You cannot be nothing."

"When I performed your... exercise... I felt nothing. I felt dead. My body refused to move."

"Yet you called to us to end it."

"Even that was not easy."

Ten-Abu Donba regarded her without words. She looked away to watch torchlight and shadow. When his silence persisted she asked, "Were you able to hear the Force before it was... lost?"

"Yes," the priest said. "The monks who go down into the towns to gather supplies were the first to contract the disease. They say it was created by a Sith."

"It was. Though I don't think that woman considered herself Sith at the end."

"Then she sought to banish the Force forever?"

"She called it... *liberation*." Talon's lips twisted.

"Ah. Freedom can be a terrifying thing. Many of us prefer our chains."

"Sith do not suffer under chains. They *break* them."

"Or perhaps they exchanged one set of shackles for another." The priest shrugged. "It does not matter. They're all gone now, or so you told me."

Talon nodded grimly.

After a pause, Ten-Abu Donba said, "It was difficult to adjust to life without the Force, but many of our monks never felt it at all. Yet they made their devotions and contemplated its mysteries. They were guides to those of us who'd lost it." His voice took on a fond tone. "After so much time, I found myself a student again. The galaxy is full of wonders."

"There is nothing wonderful about what has happened."

"Perhaps our definitions of 'wonder' are different. I know the story of the Yuuzhan Vong. Losing the Force was their first step to acquiring greater understanding. Could that not be true for you also?"

She couldn't stop a sigh. "Khat Lah has been forcing that question on me for years. I have no answer. I will *never* have an answer. All I have is nothing because I *am* nothing."

Her voice went shrill. Embarrassed, she snapped her jaw shut and waited for the old monk to judge her.

She expected vague hopeful platitudes, the kind Khat Lah fed her. Instead he said, "You are right. I believe you *are* nothing."

"At least you're honest," she said bitterly.

"I've heard you were a Sith from birth. Is that true?"

She nodded. "The only parent I remember is my teacher, Darth Ruyn. I killed him."

"I understand. You are a hollow vessel, once filled to the brim, then spilled empty. Now you wait for something to fill you again."

"Nothing can fill me."

"Never put faith in the void. Life defies it in ways we never expect."

"Without the Force I can be nothing. I can *only* be nothing." She glared at him. "What do you think I could possibly become without it?"

The Talid's lips tugged to bare teeth, like a human's smile. "Something I'd never expect."

Talon growled frustration. The old priest rose from his crouch and added, "I cannot solve your problem. If the Force stays silent, only you can do that. Sith, like Jedi, believed the Force respond to what it finds inside you, do they not?"

"They... did."

"Then why should that be different now? The disease did not silence the Force, it deafened you. The Force is the Force. It has not changed."

She looked at her hands, red and black. "I... would like to believe that."

"Is there any reason you should not?"

Only the grief in her heart. Ten-Abu Donba plodded out of the chamber and left her without another word. Talon kept staring at her hands, clenching and unclenching them, wondering if they were still more than crude matter.

Jariah had never known Cade to be the patient type, but his friend was putting in impressive hours on the reconstruct-R2's-

memory project. It gave him something to do on the long flight out to Bavinyar, but left Jariah and especially Deliah feeling restless. They were, yet again, flying into an unknown situation with unknown dangers. It would be good for Cade to give them a little prep beforehand.

When Cade finally did emerge from the secondary cargo hold, he was in no mood for that. Instead cracked open a bottle of Corellian whiskey and brought it to the crew lounge to share.

"You discover any long-lost secret relatives yet?" Jariah asked as he sipped from his glass.

"Nah, just expected ones," Cade sighed. He slumped on the sofa and Deliah slumped into him, eager for some affection. He draped an arm across her shoulders and added, "I gotta say it's weird, though, finally getting faces to some names I only heard of. Weird seeing my grandma as a teenager, Roan Fel as a little baby..."

"Seriously?" Deliah said.

"Yeah. Kid was crying all the time. Whiny as hell."

She snorted. "Bet you could sell that for good credits someplace."

"Bet we could," Cade hummed thoughtfully.

Deliah started playing with the stubble on his chin, and Cade got a stupid grin on his face and it was clear what they had in mind. Jariah excused himself, taking the glass of whiskey with him. After all the years he'd spent on *Mynock* with them, he knew when to walk out.

It still made him think of Ahnah. He'd never used to dwell on women behind him, just the ones in front of him. Like most things nowadays, he blamed the Force. It might be useful if you trained in it, but it twisted you up in unexpected ways. Deliah had told him more than once that he seemed more mature now. Jariah had feigned shock at the insult, but maybe she was right. With the Force he knew things and felt things more deeply than he had before. At the beginning he'd been afraid his new Force-sensitivity would end with him turning into some crazy murderous Sith-type; his dark side had always been stronger than his light. But that hadn't happened, maybe because he had Cade and Deliah to hold him straight.

The whiskey wasn't pulling Jariah out of his uncomfortably thoughtful mood, so he made his way down to the secondary

hold, vaguely curious as to what R2 and C-3PO were up to. He figured he might get a peek on the sideshow and entertained hopes for some shots of Cade as a drooling, babbling baby. Those would be good for some laughs, and possibly blackmail.

Yet he hesitated before entering. The door to the chamber was open and he could pick up C-3PO's tinny voice, occasionally interspersed by R2's warbles.

"Yes, yes, Artoo, I will admit it. The thought that you might have been permanently deactivated- damaged beyond repair- did give me some discomfort." The protocol droid's voice sounded unusual, more thoughtful than prissy.

R2 hooted the C-3PO replied, "Well, that is some comfort. I'm glad to know you felt my absence when I was gone all those years. I'm pleased to see you've stayed in service so long, Artoo. To be truthful, I always suspected one of your reckless escapades would get you atomized or turned into scrap."

The astromech made a rude sound.

"What do you mean, *my* escapades? You should know as well as anyone that I am the embodiment of caution."

R2-D2 razzed again.

"Don't you call me paranoid you discombobulated tin can. Your memories are still disorganized, your perceptions unclear. I am a *protocol* droid. I am designed to facilitate interactions between sentients, not stir up trouble. That's *your* specialty."

The astromech made a series of tweets. To Jariah's slightly-drunk mind, they sounded prideful.

"Ah! Reckless as always," C-3PO cried, then softened his tone. "Though I do say, Artoo, I am... glad to see you returning to yourself. I was quite worried that we would reactive you, only to find that you were not... you."

R2 whistled a query.

"Yes, I suppose this is an overly philosophical view. Not fit for a protocol droid, I know. It's clear you have developed some aberrations from your original programming after so many years of service. Perhaps I have as well."

The response was a chortling sound.

"Well! I don't know whether to be complimented or insulted. But I do like to think there is something... unique about us, Artoo. We've been through so much, and so often in the service of so many Skywalkers..."

R2-D2 chirped.

“You say it is our lot in life? Well, so much as we can be said to have lives... It does seem to be the case. But have you ever wondered if that may one day end? As we have both proven, Artoo, we droids can survive long periods of deactivation and great tribulations to our physical forms. These organics are so much more fragile, so... precarious. One day, hopefully far off, Master Cade will permanently cease to function. Perhaps he will pass on his genes to manufacture a new Skywalker, though I understand there are complications if he would ever do so with Mistress Deliah... And frankly, Artoo, Mistress Deliah does not seem like the parental type. Nor Master Cade.”

Still hiding outside, Jariah had to stifle laughter.

Unaware, C-3PO went on. “Have you ever wondered, Artoo, what would become of us if there *were* no Skywalkers? I feel as though that would create a void in our core programming...”

R2-D2 whistled urgently.

“Yes, I know I am being philosophical. There’s nothing *actually* in our programming ordering us to serve the Skywalkers. Yet it feels as though we have been compelled too, time and again, through the most unlikely circumstances...”

The astromech hooted.

“Yes. You are right. The universe is indeed a strange, incalculable place. That is why I’ve been pondering a universe without Master Cade and his kind... however unlikely that seems.”

R2’s reply sounded determined.

“What do you mean, Skywalkers can never die? Ah, you say they exist as long as we remember them and can tell the tale. Well, now *you’re* the one being philosophical, Artoo.”

The response was curt.

“Perhaps you are right. Even if there *were* no Skywalkers, our many years of experience would remain, as would everything they’ve done for the galaxy. Their mark on history has been made, regardless of us.”

R2’s next noise was shrill.

“You really think they’d never have done anything without our help? Why, now you’re getting delusions of grandeur.”

The astromech blurted rudely.



“What do you mean I tell you that all the time? Enough of this, Artoo. We’ve strayed too far from the topic at hand. Let’s get back to reviewing your memories. We were trying to arrange your records of Mistress Leia and Master Han’s children, and here, at least, I know I can quite useful...”

Jariah stepped away at last, unsure whether he should be amused or discomfited by the conversation he’d just heard. All he did know was that tonight was for drinking alone.

## Chapter Seventeen

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The resistance safehouse by the banks of the Western Sea was a single apartment located near the bottom of a residential tower. The view was thus unglamorous: the single broad window-pane looked out on the rust-stained face of an adjacent storage center. As such they had a natural shield from prying eyes, something Jao was very thankful for right now. He was already losing his nerves worried about Ania; throw paranoia in and he'd be a total mess.

As it was, he still required effort to concentrate on the matter at hand. He paced tightly back and forth while Yalta Val and Saaraï occupied couches in the center of the living room and leaned across the low table to read from the same datapad.

"This is the information Senator Gahan's contacts were able to come up with," Saaraï explained. "Actual locations for top-priority prisoners are safely guarded by the Federal Security Bureau... But our contact *was* able to pull these."

"They look like staff profiles," said Val.

"This is key information for the FSB's incarceration officers, specifically the locations they were posted at."

"How far back do these records go?"

"See for yourself." Saaraï leaned back so he could look closer. "It's the complete list going back to the formation of the Federation Triumvirate six years ago."

"I don't see what good that gets us," Jao said.

"We know Chalk has been moving Admiral Stazi, Senator Nelloran, and Senator Kaige through different prisons," said Saaraï. "The issue is, we've never known whether he uses the same FSB officers to shepherd the prisoners to different

locations, or whether he keeps the officers at one location and only moves the prisoners.”

“I’d think he’d move both,” Val said. “At the very least he’d need the prisoners guarded during location transfer.”

“Exactly. That’s what the resistance always thought, but now we have hard evidence.”

Saarai took the datapad again. Jao leaned over her shoulder and saw her bring up spreadsheets with highlighted rows. “At different times over the past three years, the resistance has tried to find the location of all three top prisoners. Obviously our intel wasn’t always accurate-” Val hummed grim agreement. “-but we had the most clues as to Nelloran’s locations. We didn’t have the ability to mount a rescue operation at the time, but look at this. Here are the FSB staff currently posted at Praxal VII, where we know Nelloran is for sure. And here’s the staff for where Nelloran *used* to be, based on the places and times our old intel told us.”

This all seemed very shaky to Jao, but Saaraï seemed enthused by the digital sleuthing, and so was Val. “Always the same people,” the older man observed.

“Exactly,” the Chagrian grinned. “There it is. That’s our confirmation that Chalk keeps one set of FSB agents with the same prisoner.”

“But how does that help us find *Stazi*?” asked Jao.

“We’ve identified two other cohorts of five to ten FSB officers who work as a team and have been shuffled from location to location over the past three years. They’re always in one spot for a duration of at least four months.”

“Ah, that is excellent work.” Val was clearly eager. “Where did you learn your tracking skills, Miss Derrol?”

She almost looked embarrassed. “It’s not that complex. I simply looked for patterns from one set of data, then collated them with patterns from another.”

“So where does that get us?” Jao asked.

Saarai tapped her screen. “If you look at those FSB cohorts, they’re currently at Praxal VII- which we knew- plus Selvaris and Garen IV.”

“So we’ve narrowed it down to two.” To Jao that seemed close but too far.

Val stoked his beard. “What if you had a *third* set of data?”

“Do you?” Saarai looked very interested.

“I wouldn’t call it data exactly, but once I realized Praxal VII was a setup, I looked at the information I had again. Specifically, I looked at the prisons, and their wardens.”

“Prison wardens are part of the Correctional Authority, not the FSB,” Saarai said. “I don’t have that information.”

“I do. I’ve already looked it up and I remember it.” Val tapped his temple. “Now, I thought that if I were Chalk, I’d want very specific people to watch over my most dangerous prisoners. Specifically, I’d want people who could think like Stazi.”

“You mean a military background,” reasoned Jao.

“Exactly. A lot of FSB and FCA officials came up through the ranks, but some are ex-military. However, a lot of *those* were pulled up from the dregs of Krayt’s military.”

Saarai frowned. “Most of the officers who served under Krayt were jailed themselves.”

“Yes, but Krayt’s empire dwarfed Roan Fel’s in manpower. Once Marasiah took over, lower-ranked officers from Krayt’s forces with no apparent war crimes to their name were given new positions. Many were shuffled to the FCA.”

Jao frowned. “Would Chalk trust officers who used to work for Krayt?”

“No, and that’s the point. Ex-Krayt officers were put in charge of prisons for violent criminals, mobsters, and the like. Jails with high-ranking Krayt officers were only- and I meant *only*- run by people who’d been loyal to Roan Fel. This was a policy Marasiah set up, and I see no reason Chalk would change it.”

“It makes sense,” said Saarai. “What does that tell you about Selvaris versus Garen IV?”

“Selvaris is quite near the military base at Bilbringi,” Val said, “And I know that its current warden, an ex-general named Zegorian, used to be assistant director of the shipyard there. Before that he commanded a star destroyer attached to Admiral Fenel’s fleet. I met Zegorian once or twice during the war.”

“And who is the warden at Garen IV?”

Val consulted memory, then lapsed into a smile. “Vagalies Teem. Career FCA. Never been in the military.”

Silence filled the room. They each looked at Saarai’s datapad,

as though expecting more revelation, but it seemed like they'd already found what they'd needed. The manner in which they'd puzzled out Stazi's location seemed too easy, but they'd compiled it from three different information sources, and there was no way Chalk could have anticipated that.

And it hadn't come easy, Jao reminded himself. He'd already lost too much on this mission.

Saarai blew out a breath, then smiled. "There's a comm system in the back room. I need to transit all this to the resistance leaders."

"You're going to tell them all of it?" asked Val.

"Absolutely." She rose and scooped up her datapad. "Master Val, you may have just saved the resistance."

She scampered from the room, smile on her face, and as Val set back on the sofa he smiled too. Jao turned away and stared out the window at the ugly wall beyond. What they'd found here was good, and might even change history, but it had brought him no closer to Ania. Until that happened, he could never feel satisfied again.

The mood in *Paramount's* briefing room was expectant and tense. When intelligence chief Ekorian had called only a select few to the meeting, Kyra knew something important had happened, maybe related to Saara's Coruscant mission, and had braced herself for the worst. Yet when she stepped into the chamber and saw those assembled, she knew it was an action meeting.

She took her seat in the middle of the oblong table, between Asaak Dan and the other ex-Jedi to join the rebel cause. They'd not been able to take Karrashchakuk on the mission to Praxal VII, as a two-and-a-half-meter Wookiee would not pass easily as an FCA guard, but he was actually the most capable resistance fighter among the rebels' former Force-users. For nearly a decade Karrash, along with his father Lowbacca, had led a guerilla war against Imperials occupying their home of Kashyyyk.

Kyra still had a hard time being around Karrash, and it was all because of his father. She'd spent a year travelling the stars with Lowbacca, seeking a way to regain the Force. Lowbacca had done so, for a few brief hours, before he'd sacrificed

himself to save Cade Skywalker. Kyra could see still the venerable Wookiee master dissolving in an eruption of pure Force energy. She'd stood to the side and watched, helpless.

Karrash had given Kyra no indication that he held his father's death against her, but she had a hard time reading the Wookiee, even with the Force. Lowbacca had been nearly a century and a half old, and his son was nearing one hundred himself. That made him formidable in way Asaak or Ganner were not.

Those two looked tense as well, especially Ganner. Having to mercy kill two comrades on the Praxal VII mission had worn at him, but it wasn't the first time he'd had to take such hard actions. He'd withdraw into himself for a while, then come back out. Kyra had seen the grim process before.

When more beings joined the room, the four already there sat at attention. Sukharr walked in first. Staretts and Anj followed the Trandoshan, and behind the two humans came Ekorian.

After the others took their seats the squat Drall stood atop her chair and said, "Thank you all for coming quickly. We've received important news from Coruscant about Admiral Stazi's whereabouts."

The group hunched close as Ekorian related the data they'd received and how they'd pinpointed Stazi's location. It sounded to Kyra like a pile of conjecture- apparently from three separate sources no less- but as the Drall went into detail she began to see what a clever discovery it was. It made sense that Chalk would select trusted ex-military officers to watch over Stazi, and they had strong evidence that he was being minded by the same set of FSB agents wherever he went. When all the information was collated, one option remained: Selvaris.

"I want to believe we have the right planet this time," Ganner said, "But what are the sources for this? Are they reliable?"

"Most of the data was retrieved by Saarai Derrol, through Monia Gahan," said Ekorian.

"I trust Monia," Anj said, "Absolutely."

Naturally Rogue Leader would trust the ex-pilot, but Ganner was still cautious. "Where did the guesswork about the wardens come from?"

"It is not guesswork," Ekorian corrected. "We have checked our own information about the FCA leadership and found it accurate. High-ranking officers who served under Krayt have

only been kept at prisons led by Fel's former naval and army officers. The FSA cohort that's been warding Stazi has only moved through those prisons."

"That's good to know, but where did it come from initially?"

The Drall took a breath, then said, "Yalta Val."

Disquiet circled the chamber, but Kyra was simply surprised. She'd been in this room when the resistance leadership had, politely but firmly, told Jao to stay away from his old master, for his own good.

"Wait a minute," she said, "How did Val get back in the picture? Did someone make contact with him on Coruscant?"

"Yes," said Ekorian. "Former Imperial Knight Jao Assam accompanied Saaraï to Coruscant and made contact with his former teacher."

The news was like a blow. She'd thought her friends were on Druckenwell, clear of all this. Instead Jao had been in the heart of it and she'd had no idea. Nobody had bothered to tell her. That hurt, and she found it hard to concentrate on what was said next. She wondered if Ania and AG-37 had gone with him. If so, they'd never take *Free Agent* back to Coruscant; they were sure Calk had the ship marked. But Ekorian said Jao had gone with Saaraï.

Her mind ran in frustrated circles until she heard the Drall clearly say, "We will not launch this mission unless we have firm agreement from the participants. You've seen the evidence. You know the risks. Naturally, we'll send reconnaissance probes to Selvaris to assess the prison's location and defenses, and Saaraï will see if she can gain more information about the site on Coruscant. For now, I'd like to know if all of you are on board with moving ahead."

Moving ahead meant quite likely another dangerous infiltration mission. It might even mean a confrontation with Eli. Without thinking, she traced the scar over her cheek with one finger.

Karrash roared, again pulling her back to here and now. The Wookiee said this was a chance they should absolutely take.

"I agree," said Asaak. "If we can do it right this time... it will make the cost we've already paid worth it."

Ganner looked reticent. Kyra found her voice. "I trust the source." She trusted Jao. "Go ahead."

Everyone looked to the former Imperial Knight. He looked around, meeting each set of eyes like an accusation. "Alright then," Ganner finally said. His voice was very dry. "Go ahead with it. After all, what have we got to lose?"



## Chapter Eighteen

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From above, Milagro was unprepossessing. Its sphere was a forested mix, with differing patches of greens, browns, and rust-reds. With his eyes alone Eli would have spotted nothing remarkable about it, but if what he'd gleaned from Ania Solo's memories was true, and the Yuuzhan Vong shapers had indeed found a way to turn back the corruption that had ruined the world fifteen years ago, then each subtle change in coloration marked a victory or defeat in a biological war that could have profound ramifications for the entire galaxy.

As he stared at the planet from the bridge of the light assault frigate *Silencer*, knowing what he did, it was hard not to think of Duro and what had happened there. Everything- the Sith-Imperial war, the rise of Krayt, the corruption of the Force and everything bad in Eli Horn's life- had started with the ruin of the Ossus Project. It was strange to think they were some beings still trying to right those wrongs, like they could turn back time. It was stranger to think some of them were succeeding.

Hogrum Chalk didn't seem to care about that. He wanted Marasiah, alive or dead, and that meant Eli couldn't afford to care either. Silently, though, he promised himself not to harm the shapers unless they made it necessary. He wasn't a butcher; his enemy was the sole Force-using woman on the planet below. If those Yuuzhan Vong scientists thought they could right the wrongs that had killed Reikar Horn, he wasn't going to stop them. If Chalk wanted the fruitful experiment razed, he could send someone else to do it.

"Sir, we've made preliminary scans and spotted a single

settlement,” said the voice behind him. “The technology is primitive, with no shields and visible defenses.”

Eli turned to see the ship’s ghoulis-looking captain. Morabbin was one of the precious handful whom Chalk trusted to hunt down the ex-empress. The two of them had worked on many missions before, and Eli had come to appreciate the Givin’s ruthless efficiency.

“That settlement is Yuuzhan Vong,” Eli reminded. “They may have defenses none of us have heard of before.”

“I understand. That is why I suggest we approach with speed, but caution.”

“Caution I understand. Speed?”

“Our sensors have detected one long-range transmission station. We’re uncertain whether they’ve called for help, but it *is* possible.”

Eli doubted the Yuuzhan Vong scientists had much help to call for, but Morabbin was right. There was no sense idling.

“Deploy the fighter squadron. Have two flights stay in orbit and look for runners. I’ll take the lead flight down with me.”

“Understood, sir.”

If the settlement really was unprotected, it would be easy to just pound the thing to ash from orbit. Eli and the captain both knew it, but they also knew Chalk wanted a body. That meant they would have to do it the hard way. Eli had never faced the ex-empress in battle and had no idea what she was capable of, though he’d pondered the confrontation many times. So far he’d only tested his mettle against Kyra, a woman with less Force-training than he.

But Eli had his duty. Succeed or fail, he had to try.

“Send word to the hangar,” he told Morabbin. “Have the assault team prep the shuttle. I’m going to join them now.”

Before the attack came Marasiah felt something in the Force, but she pushed it away. She couldn’t allow herself to trust that nagging voice, so with practiced ease she retreated into the empty core of herself the Force couldn’t touch.

Relief didn’t last long. From the room of her modest cabin at the settlement’s edge, she heard the clamor of people, and then the whine of a shrill alarm. When she went outside, Marasiah saw Yuuzhan Vong running through the unpaved streets. She

looked up at the cloud-streaked sky and say nothing, but the Force was still talking to her, less nagging and now shouting. With reluctance she opened herself to it and tried to hear all of its message, but all she could gather was what her other senses already told: danger was coming.

Marasiah ran for the center of the settlement. The transmission tower above the communication shed was her guide, and when she reached the tall structure she nearly collided with Shok Phath as he exited. The tall warrior was one of the few who'd stayed to guard the shaper colony, and as soon as he saw Marasiah his eyes went wide.

"Come, Marasiah Fel, we must get you to safety."

"What safety? What's happening?"

Another figure followed Shok Phath out of the communications shed: the master shaper, Nei Rin. The woman said, "A starship in orbit had launched fighters and a shuttle. They are coming this way."

Marasiah's heart pounded. "What kind of ship?"

"A frigate. The design looks Imperial."

It wouldn't have come to Milagro by accident. Either her uncle had sent them for her, specifically, or he'd learned of the terraforming project and come to stamp it out.

Shok Phath clamped a hard hand on her bicep. "We have some defenses, but they will not hold. We must go."

"Go *where*?" Her voice cracked. She hadn't felt this overwhelmed, this helpless, since the attack on *Alliance*.

"The forest offers places to hide. It is terrain we know, but they do not. Come. My warriors will protect you."

Protect her and die for her. Marasiah felt sick. It was all happening again and when the Force had tried to warn her she'd pushed it away. She squinted at the sky, seeking but not finding the attacking ships.

"We have just called for help," explained Nei Rin, "But it will take time getting here. We must abandon the settlement and scatter into the forest."

"But your research—"

"We will gather it now." The shaper put a hand on Marasiah's shoulder. "Go with Shok Phath. Be safe. *Please*."

She looked at the sky again, still nothing, then nodded. Shok Phath pulled her away, toward four other waiting warriors.

They all gripped amphistaffs and had thud bug bandoliers strapped over broad chests; it made Marasiah acutely aware that she had no lightsaber, no blaster. No weapon except the Force itself.

They started for the settlement's edge when Marasiah heard the so-familiar roar of TIE fighters. She looked back and there they were, diving out of the clouds: four Predators arrayed in covering formation around a boxy assault shuttle. That kind of ship could carry a full platoon of stormtroopers, she knew.

Shok Phath kept pulling her toward the edge but Marasiah kept looking back. As the attackers drew close something rose from the forest canopy ringing the settlement. Insectoid creatures, propelled by fast-fluttering wings, seemed to leap from treetop to TIEs. The pilots didn't even have time to fire before they had intruders climbing over the hulls of their craft. One lost control of his ship and spiraled into the forest, exploding with a thunderous shock-wave. Another tried to skim the canopy and peel off the attacker, but a tall tree sheared off its right solar panel.

"Grutchins are most effective," Shok Phath told her with audible pride. "But we must hide."

They hurried to the treeline but Marasiah kept looking back. The other two TIEs managed to shake off their grutchins but began vengeful strafing runs. She watched as green laser-blasts impacted on the transmission tower and the whole thing vanished in a pillar of flame. Twisted metal rained over the settlement and some of the wood buildings started to catch fire.

As smoke rose to blacken the sky, the assault shuttle lowered itself imperiously into the center of the settlement. Though Shok Phath tried to tug her into the forest she resisted, peering hard through smoke and burning buildings, hoping and dreading what she'd see.

Marasiah could make out the shuttle land and saw its broad ramp lower. Stormtroopers rushed out, rifles raised but for the moment silent. The shapers would run, not put up a fight. After spending so long among the Force-absent Yuuzhan Vong, these sentients were like clear beacons. She could feel their hard, ruthless intention as they scoured the burning settlement. She could feel another mind, brighter and more powerful than any of theirs. Wind kicked up a veil of ash, obscuring her view of

the shuttle, but she could tell whoever accompanied them was a Force-user, and he was searching for her.

Marasiah retreated from the Force, hoping desperately she hadn't given herself away. She let Shok Phath pull her into the trees and followed the warriors through the forest. They moved on no clear path, instead hopping over fallen branches and pushing through clusters of dense brush. Marasiah knew they were leaving a trail in their haste and prayed Shok Phath had a way to foil trackers.

She stumbled at the sound of laserfire behind them. Marasiah peered back but saw only dense trees and lashing tongues of the fire they'd left behind. Then something moved, flicking in between vertical trunks. In the Force she sensed a predatory intent, getting closer. Stormtroopers, not that Force-powered hunter.

Shok Phath and the other warriors had already ranged ahead. Marasiah followed. She'd just caught up with them when the first laserblast came sizzling in from behind.

The warrior nearest to her grabbed her shoulder and shoved her down. With a war cry he pivoted, grabbed a fistful of thud bugs from his bandolier, and let them fly. Marasiah had barely risen off her knees when a volley of laserblasts caught the warrior full in the chest and knocked him down.

Shok Phath and his other fighters had taken cover behind trees. Marasiah peeked over the span of a fallen log and saw more laserfire spewing at them from at least three different positions. The stormtroopers had tracked them faster than she'd expected, and if this group hadn't called for backup, they would as soon as they spotted the sole human woman amongst the Yuuzhan Vong.

She scampered on hands and knees through the undergrowth until she reached the thick tree Shok Phath hid behind. After lobbing another thud bug back at the troopers, he hissed, "Prepare to run, Marasiah Fel. We will cover your escape."

"Run to *where*?" Even if there was a hiding place it wouldn't do any good with a stormtrooper squad right behind them.

"I will send Lash Rapuung with you. He is our fastest runner." He gestured to a lanky warrior covering behind a nearby tree. "We will cover your escape."

More people sacrificing and dying for her. Marasiah felt sick;

she'd thought she was done with this.

Another spray of laserblasts tore bark from Shok Phath's tree. Over the increasingly loud whine of rifle-fire, he shouted, "Go! Go now!"

Marasiah barely got off her feet. A second group of troopers came out of nowhere, cutting in from the left flank. Marasiah sensed them in the Force a second before she saw them, but it wasn't enough. Laserfire caught Shok Phath in his side and dropped him. Marasiah threw up a barrier of Force energy, blocking another round of shots, then scampered for cover behind another tree, but fire was coming in from two separate angles now. It was impossible to hide from.

Lash Rapuung leaped from his tree, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her through the forest. Their flight was short and desperate; Marasiah's foot caught an upraised root and she stumbled, forcing the warrior to stop and pull her upright. That was when a laser blast hit the side of his head, burning a black furrow above his ear and turning his left eye to smoke.

Marasiah stared at that scorched face, frozen with shock of death, until Lash Rapuung's limp body tumbled into the undergrowth.

When he was down she didn't run. She turned, slowly, and saw a half-dozen stormtroopers converging on her from multiple directions, rifles raised. All the Yuuzhan Vong were already down. Her protectors were all dead, again.

Time slowed down. Marasiah opened herself to the Force without fear or hesitation. She sensed the minds of these stormtroopers and she knew what they knew. Their orders were to take the fugitive, alive if possible. They knew who she was and had no qualms about shooting her down. They were her uncle's men to the bone.

She also knew that, during the fight with the Yuuzhan Vong, they'd been exclusively using blasters set to *kill*. None of them had changed settings to *stun* yet, but it would take only a second. And then they'd drop her and haul her back to the shuttle, and that would be the end of everything.

She knew that, and she knew there was one way out. She had no lightsaber or blaster, but she had the Force. She'd tried hard for the past three years to withdraw from it. At times she even hated it. But if the Force could use her- use Antares- for its

elusive ends, then she could damn well use the Force for hers. She could use it without hesitation or doubt, without fear of what it might make her.

In that so-long second before the troopers could gun her down, Marasiah let the Force flow gush into her and out of her. She made herself the center of a whirlwind fueled by frustration and anger and spite. She embraced those black feeling because they were all she had and accepted the strength that had been hers to claim all along.

The long second ended. The next second was white. Marasiah couldn't say exactly what happened in that second; when it was over she stood in the untouched center of a scorched-black ring. Scrub was reduced to ash and trees, burned to skeletons, cracked and crashed to the forest floor. The six stormtroopers lay at her feet, unmoving. Each set of dirty armor was cracked and crunched, as though smashed inward by a thousand heavy blows. Some blood leaked through gaps in the broken plates and joined the black soil.

There was devastation but no lingering flames, no heat at all. The destruction Marasiah had wrought was more deadly than fire.

She couldn't say how long she stared at the ruin around her. She knew it was all her doing, product of a second-long manifestation of pure rage. A Force storm, they called it. She'd never known she'd had that power inside of her, and never suspected how easy it was to summon.

She stared at the death she'd made and felt only one regret. From the settlement, she felt the attention of that Force-powered seeker. He'd found her and was coming for her. Even through the distance, she felt he was afraid.

He should be. Marasiah clenched hands to fists, turned from the wreckage of her storm, and ran deeper into the forest.

Talon hadn't hoped for much when they'd arrived at Ando Prime, but she still felt dull disappointment as their Sekotan flyer soared clear of the planet's atmosphere, leaving the white sphere to dwindle behind them.

During her years of travel and vain searching, Khat Lah had always nudged her toward the conviction that she could make herself anew without the Force. Yet the high priest on Ando

Prime, Ten-Abu Donba, had asserted the exact opposite. He'd called her an empty vessel, one made to be filled by the Force. He implied that could still be true, even if she could no longer use it.

There was no comfort in that. Jedi and Dai Bendu monks might be content to flow with the Force, but she'd been trained as Sith. To her, the Force had always been something to command. And yet, she wistfully thought as she sat in her cabin, passively partaking in the Force's will would be better than the pure void she was trapping in now. Even if she didn't regain the Force's strength, she'd at least have some purpose.

Someone knocked hard on the door of her cabin and she rose from the bed, glad for distraction. On the other side of the door was the warrior Neshri Buhl. He said, "You must come to the cockpit. Now."

Talon followed him to the front of the flyer, wondering what could possibly be so important. Best she knew, Khat Lah hadn't even decided where they'd go next. Yet right before she reached the cockpit she felt dovin basal propel them into lightspeed, and when she entered she saw the flickering vortex of what the Yuuzhan Vong called darkspace through the viewport.

Khat Lah was hunched over the pilot but turned to Talon as she entered. "We've received a distress call," he said.

"From whom?"

"The shaper installation on Milagro. They are under attack."

Occasionally Khat Lah had taken them there to resupply, though Talon had never gone into the settlement to mingle. They said Marasiah Fel was sulking there, and she'd wanted to avoid an encounter.

"Who are the attackers?" she asked.

"The transmission was brief, but they said one Federation frigate. Imperial design."

"How far away is Milagro?"

"Thirteen hours. There may be nothing when we get there, but we must go."

"And prepare for a fight?"

"Of course."

His eyes asked a question. Talon found the answer easily. Without the Force she wasn't the fighter she had been, but she



still practiced sparring with the warriors here. The thought of testing herself against real enemies whetted appetites that hadn't fully dulled.

Her smile was tight and cruel. "I'll fight any battle," she said, and for a happy moment felt strength and purpose again.

## Chapter Nineteen

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As she stared out the airspeeder's window, watching the endless stretch of gleaming waves and smelling the salty tang to the wind, Marin admitted that if *she* were an ancient, mysterious, Force-powerful artifact, she'd pick a place like this to hide. Bavinyar had no native sentient life, and no records of settlement until the late years of the Old Republic. That Tho Yor must have laid undisturbed, gradually being covered by the ocean-floor sediment, for tens of thousands of years, dozens of light-years away from anyone who might have had the power to disturb it, and even they would never think to look two kilometers beneath the ocean surface.

But now, finally, Marin was going to wake it up. The odds were beyond astronomical. She couldn't help but wonder if the Force had guided this moment. There seemed no other explanation. If so, Marasiah was right to be bitter; the Force could be a cruel master, as Marin herself had learned almost fifty years ago, when its revelation that guided Vitor to his death.

Her cousin had accepted it in the end; all he'd had to give up was his life. Marasiah had lost everything but her own.

Marin tried to square that possibility with the new things they'd learned about the Force. She was relying entirely on Cade Skywalker's hearsay, not an inherently reliable source, but when he'd told her about his experiences in the Tho Yor and on the other side of Rohakalla's hypergate, she'd sensed he was telling the truth as best he understood.

According to Cade, the Force was a layered thing. The Living Force was the one they existed in. It was produced by life,

flowed with it and could be controlled by it. Above that was the Cosmic Force, the noncorporeal plane into which all life-essences passed upon death, though few retained consciousness or cohesion. The Cosmic Force drew power from the Living Force and, more, could control it in subtle ways. Beings on the mortal plane who'd attained perfect union with the Living Force could dissolve their crude bodies and ascend to the Cosmic without passing through death's gate; instead they became immortal, and their coherent consciousness endured as timeless Whills that could direct both the Cosmic and Living Force. Among the Whills themselves there was another divide, product of schism between light and dark that went back to the dawn of galactic civilization. According to Cade, this divide between the Whills and the Cosmic Force filtered down to the Living, where the so-called light and dark sides tugged temptingly at Jedi and Sith without ever exerting full control.

Jedi had speculated endlessly about the nature of the Force, and none of that totally went against theories Marin had heard bandied about by Masters in the Ossus temple all those years ago. But according to Cade the Living Force had once been spread across all sentient life in the galaxy; every last being had been able to touch its power. That had changed when the people now called Celestials had ascended to become Whills. Fearful of the power of their successor races, especially the Rakata, they'd used their newfound influence over the Cosmic Force to withdraw the Living. They'd scattered pieces of their physical selves- the microbes called midi-chlorians- as the sole bridge to connect this galaxy's life-forms to the Living Force. The separation wrought by the Whills seemed a milder version of what had happened to the Yuuzhan Vong, when their race had fallen to madness and, like the Rakata, been stripped off the Force.

If all this was true, Marin couldn't puzzle out how the Force could be guiding events now. The Whills didn't want the Living Force to return to full strength. Maybe they were even right to; Marin had met many sentients in the lives she'd lived, and most of them got on fine without the Force. To give it to them would be equal parts blessing and curse, especially when the power of the Whills tugged beings toward either light or darkness, away from balance. There was no telling how it could

affect what was, currently, a galaxy at peace.

Yet somehow, it seemed like something was guiding them to the Tho Yor. Perhaps the Tho Yor's creators, the ethereal Ones which Cade had spoken of, had seen the future and prepared for this day. Or perhaps there was another flow in the Force, more powerful than the Whills'. Some of those old theorizing masters, her grandmother Jaina included, had suggested that beyond the Force the Jedi knew, split between light and dark, there was an even deeper layer, a Unifying Force that embraced and empowered all existence. The Unifying Force could never be commanded or controlled, not even by ascended Whills; it simply *was*.

"Marin," Sauk said, "We're almost here."

Words brought her back to physical reality. The endless spread of ocean had begged her mind to wander, and Marin directed it back to the airspeeder cabin in which she sat. Sauk was seated at the pilot's station, in a bubble of reinforced glass that bulged out of the amphibious craft's foremost section. The ship widened behind him and Marin sat in the chair off his left shoulder. To the right was a Quarren named Wreskar, another member of the Dac Resettlement Commission's mapping team that had found the Tho Yor on the ocean floor. At the rear, AG-37 squatted awkwardly, legs half-retracted into his torso so his tall metal frame could fit in the cabin.

Marin leaned forward to look out the window, but all she saw was more ocean. "Are you sure?"

Sauk tapped his navigational controls. "We're at the right latitude and longitude. All we need to do now is drop."

Marin could feel the speeder decelerate. As Sauk began preparations for submersion, Marin looked to Wreskar. "Has anyone asked about this area yet?"

"The Bavinyari government is getting impatient we haven't handed in our maps yet. So far I've managed to convince them it's the result of a technical issue," the Quarren said. "But I don't expect them to let it go. They don't exactly appreciate the millions of refugees that empress forced on them, and they've been looking over the Resettlement Commission's shoulder the entire time."

It was about what Marin had expected. The cumbersome nature of galactic government worked in their favor here, and

odds were that news of the slow-down wouldn't reach Hogrum Chalk's ears for days.

Of course, that might change depending on what happened next.

On Sauk's direction, the speeder lowered itself steadily toward the ocean. It dropped straight through; water lapped around its curved hull and swallowed it. Water wavered on the sea's surface, but that steadily dwindled and the featureless blue around them grew darker. After they'd dropped for what seemed like five minutes, Sauk finally activated the powerful turbines that would propel them for the rest of the underwater journey.

As they surged ahead, Sauk turned on two powerful flood-lamps that stabbed into the darkening waters. They showed very little aside from occasional swirls of fish. The ocean floor was still invisible beneath them, shrouded in deep blue.

"Have either of you been down here to see it personally?" asked Marin. "Or is this your first time?"

"Nobody's been down to see it," Wreskar said. "Until we've only used drones and sonar imaging. I admit I am.... excited."

She wondered how much this Quarren knew about the Tho Yor, or her. Sauk hadn't been clear on that. The whole group waited in tense silence as they moved deeper. Thickening water above them gradually swallowed all sunlight. Sauk barely watched the dark blur outside; his eyes were on the sensor console's directional readout.

Using that as his guide, the Mon Cal pitched their nose lower and accelerated. When he levelled out they were near the ocean floor. He directed the searchlights downward to paint the ground beneath in pools of white. It was like an alien landscape down here. Clusters of coral formations sprung up like leafless, thick-bodied trees. Their lights chased swirls of fish with long black bodies and gigantic eyes.

And then, finally, they found it. Marin stood up and leaned over Sauk's shoulder to see the Tho Yor in full. It was so buried in the ocean floor's sediment that only the top pyramid was visible, and she guessed even that was partway covered. As they circled the thing, she could make out the layered, eight-spoked wheels that Cade had described.

She reached out with the Force and tried to sense anything

from the device. There was something here, very faint, like a stain in the water, though she could glean no intent from it. It was a mystery that needed answer.

"All right," Marin said, "Help me get dressed."

The deep-water gear she'd take outside was as bulky as any space suit. It needed to be, to protect her from the kilometers of ocean weighing down on her. Like a space suit the head was a transparisteel bubble, and oxygen tanks attached to her back, one on either side of a small motor to control water-intake jets.

Once she was clothed, Marin stepped past AG-37, into the decompression chamber at the rear of the ship. She tossed the droid, Sauk, and Wreskar a short salute before the door closed, sealing her from her helpers. Then the portal to the ocean opened wide. Water rushed her and swept her out into the sunless black.

Sauk had given her brief instructions on how to direct herself in the water. Those were enough. Standing upright, she powered the motor and pushed herself around the submersible, then cut a straight line to the Tho Yor.

She approached it slowly and steadily, reaching out with the Force and finding only the same inert miasma. She dared wonder if this Tho Yor was dead, and whether all this searching and coincidence was pointless. That might be a relief; as Cade had already told her, once she made contact with the Tho Yor, there was no going back.

But Marin wanted to press ahead. In her long life she'd been many things and seen the Force in many shades, but always the truth of it had eluded her. Maybe, finally, that would change.

She drew closer, closer. Cade had told her that he'd entered the Tho Yor through a light-portal at the bottom of the wheel's eight spokes. She directed herself beneath one and drew so close she could press her hand against the rough rock. Through the gloves she couldn't feel anything except a hint of texture. Disappointed, she used hands and feet and pulled herself to the wheel itself. The indentation in the pyramid slope was thick enough for a human to easily stand inside, and she did just that. She ran both hands across the black rock, clearing away from sediment and coral sprouts.

Nothing happened. Her heart fell, and she wondered if she might need to touch the thing with bare flesh. It was possible

the remove the glove of her diving suit without compromising the rest, but she had no idea what the water pressure and cold temperature would do to her hand. And yet, she thought, it would be worth it to awaken the Tho Yor.

She was giving that option serious thought when the black stone became light and the portal swallowed her whole.

Time felt different when you were alone. It was loneliness she'd never imagined in that far-off point when she'd been mortal. In here she had company of sentients whose changes marked the passage of years. There was no life at all here, just as there was no space or matter, not even the primal contrasts of light and dark. Yet despite so much lack it was not nothing. Tasha Ryo was alone but she was in the Force, and so she was everything.

She felt the intrusion of something into everything. She didn't have to welcome it; the Tho Yor's door opened on its own, ushering space and matter into the lonely place inside. Tasha had experienced such intrusions before. Once there had been the alien called Khat Lah, who'd astonished her by his ability to touch the Force without midi-chlorians. There had also been Cade Skywalker, that human who carried the seed of the Chosen One inside him. Tasha knew that Khat Lah had visited her before Cade, and this newcomer was arriving after them, but she had no idea how much time had passed in interval. When you were alone, time lost meaning.

The newcomer, Tasha realized, carried the seed of the Chosen One too, but it was not Cade Skywalker. The body came encased in a heavy suit, but Tasha saw past that and took in the flesh and bone that wreathed this construction of light. This being was older, with a wearied but less turbulent heart. It was also, she sensed, a woman.

Cade's mind had been frantic with confusion after discovering what lay inside the Tho Yor. This mind was calmer, even accepting, as though it had been prepared.

She had no mouth to speak, but Tasha Ryo asked, *Who are you?*

And the woman replied: *Call me Marin.*

*You are a Skywalker.*

*I suppose I am. Who are you?*

Touching the woman's mind, Tasha implanted a vision. She showed Marin an image floating in white: a young grey-skinned Twi'lek woman, wreathed in the green robes of a Je'daii seer. It was what Tasha had been in the flesh, when she'd had flesh at all, in that timeless far-off mortality.

*I am Tasha Ryo, she said.*

*I know of you. Cade Skywalker met you on Tython.*

So only a short time had passed. Just as Tasha knew that Cade had visited her after Khat Lah, and Cade after Marin, she knew that the Tho Yor on Tython had been destroyed after she'd talked with Cade. Events were proceeding quickly, which meant the whisps of meaning she'd picked up in the Force were true. Things were accelerating. Perhaps a climax was near. The thought instilled her with fear; she knew ever her eternity could have an end.

*How is this possible? Marin asked her. The Tho Yor on Tython was destroyed.*

*I was once a Je'daii seer. I merged with the Tho Yor to defend my world from Rakatan invaders. In merging with them my awareness was spread across all nine, and I gained understand I'd never known. Leaving one Tho Yor behind on Tython, I voyaged outward into the galaxy with the others, leading the Je'daii with me across the stars.*

*Is this the last Tho Yor?*

Yes, Tasha said. Just admitting it roused her fear. After being everything, it was hard to contemplate being nothing. *The others were destroyed one by one, mostly by the Rakata.*

*Is this device a weapon? Can you defend yourself?*

*I can. But it is not indestructible.*

*I know. I saw what happened to the one on Tython.*

*Why have you come to me, Marin?*

*The Force has gone silent across the galaxy. You directed Cade and Khat Lah to a place where they could access the Force again and share it with others. They repaired the hypergate and used it, but now the gate has been destroyed.*

It was as Tasha had feared. *I am so sorry to hear that.*

*Can you guide them back to that planet, even without the hypergate?*

*If I could I'd have done so already. No, that world is packed away at the very core of the galaxy. Knowledge of it was*



*passed to me by the Tho Yor's creator, who is now dead. Those worlds that attained sentience ascended to become Whills millions of your years ago. Most were swallowed when their stars grew old and went nova. Others were sucked into black holes or torn apart by the violence of cosmic warfare like you've never know. The hungry void at the center of the galaxy has swallowed many.*

She could feel Marin's heart wilt. *There has to be some other way. If anyone would know, it's you.*

*I am not omniscient, Tasha said. For thousands of your years I have straddled the line between the Living Force and the Cosmic Force, belonging wholly to neither. I am not mortal, and I am not a Whill.*

She was completely alone.

*You know more than anyone in this galaxy, Marin said, pleading. You must have something for us.*

She was right, but Tasha reminded, *I know what is told to me by whispers of the Force, like you.*

*I know. But so many beings have come so far and risked so much for some hint of revelation... You must have something for us. Do you want this galaxy to be cut off from the Force forever?*

*No, Tasha said, I do not.*

Her heart felt heavy for knowledge for knowledge she could not speak. Marin was small and mortal, constrained by time and flesh, but she might still be able to sense Tasha's sadness, and her fear.

The woman said, *We are not the only ones looking for you. There are those who would destroy you. If we've found you, so will they. It's only a matter of time.*

Time had been no matter to Tasha, not since she'd surrendered mortal flesh. And yet, in her lonely everything, she'd known that just as this state of existence had begun, it could one day end. She'd felt the destruction of each Tho Yor as they'd happened. She'd felt agonizing pain as pieces of her whole had been violently obliterated. If this, the last black pyramid, was destroyed, her everything would end.

No matter what choice she made, it seemed like nothing awaited her. Yes, of course Tasha was afraid. It turned out she was mortal after all.

Desperately she asked, *What of Cade Skywalker? What of Khat Lah?*

*They're coming, and other allies I can trust to protect you.*

*You should not put so much faith in me.*

*You're all we have left. Tell me, please, do you know a way we could regain the Force?*

Fear and shame held Tasha silent until she managed to say, *I am sorry. I can think of no way to guide you.*

Marin bled desperation. *But there must be something, please!*

The woman overflowed with desire. Tasha pushed her away, removing the suited figure from her everything, pushing her into the anything beyond. She felt Marin's last desperate cry before being returned to the place from which she'd come. The wordless sound lingered with Tasha afterward, like a mark of shame.

Time had held no meaning before, but it did now. Time was running out. Tasha tried to remember the selfless strength that had propelled her into the beam of Anil Kesh all those eons ago and saved her Je'daii brothers and sisters from the Rakata.

She would need that strength again, if she was to face what was to come.

## Chapter Twenty

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As their flyer dropped out of hyperspace over Milagro, Talon was restless with excitement. They'd gotten no messages from the settlement since the initial distress call and had no idea of its status; the whole place might have been burned to ash already. Not knowing made it even more thrilling. They were plunging into danger but their purpose was clear; all that remained to be seen was whether they'd be a match for the waiting challenge.

If Talon could feel the Force, it would be like the good old days. Her Yuuzhan Vong companions were not so handicapped and would probably better in a fight than her, but she was determined to take part and not shame herself.

As soon as they left hyperspace the flyer's pilot, connected to the ship's brain by masklike cognition hood, commanded it to slow to a halt. Because it lacked metallic hull and blazing thrusters, the organic vessel was already difficult for traditional starship sensors to spot. Once stopped they'd be nearly invisible.

The flyer's Yuuzhan Vong controls were unintelligible to Talon, as were its sensors, but she waited patiently while the co-pilot, also wearing a transmission hood, spoke something in his own tongue.

Neshri Buhl, standing beside Talon, translated, "One Imperial frigate, twenty degrees above the ecliptic."

Talon squinted at Milagro's mottled sphere as it filled the viewport. As yet, they were too far away to spot the frigate, which hopefully meant they were too far away to be seen.

More conversation passed between the Yuuzhan Vong. Khat

Lah barked several questions and got precise-sounding answers.

Neshri Buhl told her, "Four TIE fighters patrol in orbit. More are in the atmosphere."

"The settlement?"

"Aflame. They've landed a shuttle there."

"And survivors?"

The Yuuzhan Vong shook his head. "Too soon to tell."

Khat Lah said, "We will nudge ourselves over the settlement and let gravity pull us down. That should delay our detection."

"And then we deploy?" She put a hand on her lightsaber. It felt good to have it clipped to her belt.

"If there is anything to recover," Khat Lah said. "Now, we brace for descent."

Warnings were hurriedly called across the flyer, but the warriors aboard already knew what was coming. Talon sat on a couch against the back wall of the cockpit and let skein-like fiber drawn across her chest, firmly planting her in her seat. The others did the same, and once Milagro totally filled their vision, the flyer began its plunge.

Talon felt inertia pin her to the back of her seat, but at first the view from the cockpit barely changed. Then the details of the planet's forested surface began to swell and grow. Friction-flame from atmospheric entry occluded their viewport for half a minute, and when it cleared they were plunging like a bullet through wispy cloud-layers. Milagro rushed to meet them and Talon tensed with instinctive fear of being smashed against the surface.

But the flyer was agile like mechanical ships never could be. When they were mere two hundred meters over the forest, the dovin basals twisted them ninety degrees so they flew on-level with the canopy. Suddenly it was like a green ocean flowing beneath them, no longer a threat, and Talon breathed a tiny sigh of relief.

Khat Lah, still strapped into his own crash webbing, barked a few orders in Yuuzhan Vong, then closed his eyes, as did Neshri Buhl. Talon knew they were reaching out with the Force, sensing survivors. As far as she knew, none of the shapers here were open to the Force; Marasiah Fel might be the only being they could locate, if she was still alive.

They must have found something. Khat Lah's eyes popped open and he snapped a few more orders. The ship twisted, changing heading while keeping the same level altitude.

Talon asked, "Did we find someone?"

"I feel two strong presences in the Force," Khat Lah said. "One hunter... and one prey."

"Are they close?"

"Not to each other, but I sense desperation from the prey. I think she is under attack."

That left little doubt as to who the prey was. Talon had no love for the ex-empress, but she'd take any chance to fight. She tapped the center of her crash webbing, commanding the skein to retract. Neshri Buhl did the same and told Khat Lah, "I will take five warriors."

"Do it. We will stay in the air if we can."

The co-pilot said something frantic, and Neshri Buhl growled, "Incoming fighters. We must hurry."

Talon didn't need to be told twice. She sprinted out of the cockpit ahead of him, all the way down to the hold. The warriors waiting there saw her and commanded the landing ramp to lower. Hot wind rushed them, and as soon as Talon got her first glimpse of the forest below, the entire flyer twisted beneath her. She was thrown into Neshri Buhl and both were knocked into the wall. Above the rush of wind she could hear the howl of TIE fighters and the sharp crackle of laserfire.

Talon knew this flyer was armed, but it hadn't had many chances to prove itself in combat. It was also their only way of escaping Milagro and had to be protected at all costs. The pilots threw it into another twisting evasive and Talon clung to the wall to keep from being thrown out the open hatch.

But Neshri Buhl was attuned to the Force, and he knew what had to be done. He grasped her arm tight and pulled her toward the lowered ramp. Wind rushed through the gap; the flyer tilted starboard and dense forest filled their view. Faintly, Talon could make out the flash of rifle-fire through the trees.

"We must go now!" the warrior shouted over howling wind. "They will come back for us!"

Talon certainly hoped so. She pulled her lightsaber from her belt and held it tight, ready to take the plunge. She and Neshri Buhl edged toward the ramp; the five other warriors were right

behind them.

Then the ship trembled again, not from hard maneuver but impact on the hull. Talon lost her grip and went falling; Neshri Buhl and one more warrior went with her.

Wind rushed them; as they free-fell it felt like the air was trying to push them back up. As her body twisted, Talon looked straight up and saw the Sekotan flyer veer away, chased by two TIE Predators. No more warriors fell down after them.

Neshri Buhl hooked an arm around her waist and twisted her to face the forest. It was coming up so fast and Talon's terrified instinct was to call on the Force, but she had no Force and nothing to call on-

But the Yuuzhan Vong did. Wind still rushed them but not as hard as before; the trees approached, but slower. These two warriors were not Sith and not Jedi, but they could use that power just the same.

Humbled, Talon let them carry her into the forest below.

The blaster carbine, hot from overuse, flashed in Marasiah's hand as she scattered laserfire across the slope to her right. She'd wrestled the weapon from the stormtrooper who cooled beneath her feet. That one had been the first to peer over the edge of the shallow ravine's right edge, and on sight of his helmet she'd Force-hauled him down to the bottom with her.

It had been a stupid mistake, letting herself get trapped here, but two clusters of troopers had been herding her in a pincer movement and she was unfamiliar with this stretch of forest. She cursed herself for not exploring more during the years she'd lived here; she'd forfeited what should have been an advantage against her enemy.

They'd been hounding her for so long; Marasiah didn't even know how many hours. She didn't know if the shapers had been killed or captured, or if they still ran through the woods. She'd found a cave to hide in and rested for some hours, withdrawing from the Force to make herself difficult to track, but eventually she'd sensed her chief pursuer drawing nearer and had been forced to run.

That pursuer hadn't caught up with her yet, but he was heading her way quickly, and with troopers on both the right and left slopes of the ravine she had no place to run to. After so

much flight she was tired and hungry; the burst of wonderful destructive rage that had saved her at the beginning was hard to call upon, but to escape this she knew she had to try. Desperately she started to summon her hate, and the power it allowed.

Then something fell from the sky, crashing through the canopy, ripping out boughs and branches as it dropped toward the floor, out of view from Marasiah's position in the ravine. It took the stormtroopers by surprise too; one pivoted toward the noise, exposing his back and she took the opportunity to pump three bolts into it.

Marasiah felt more minds join the fray, two at least. The troopers upslope adjusted their fire; the ones on the left side began spraying laser-blasts over the ravine's top and the ones on the right adjusted to defend against a new enemy. To her shock, Marasiah heard the thrum of a lightsaber beneath all the other noise.

She didn't understand, but she could act. She called on the Force just enough to accelerate her charge up the left slope, then leap over the rim. She landed on her feet beside one troopers and pumped a laser-blast into his stomach. Without even looking, she knew to fire to her left and take down another. Then a bolt took her in the right shoulder. Burning pain filled that side of her body and the rifle fell from her grip, but she was still in the Force, moving with it and moving it, and she instantly converted that pain to energy. Blue lightning burst from her left hand. The trooper who'd shot her tried to cover behind a tree but the lightning crackled around the trunk, took him from both sides, and scalded him through his armor.

She could have burned him until he was dead; she wanted that. Instead laserfire came at her from the other side of the ravine and she turned away, letting the trooper slump weakly against the tree. She counted three white-armored soldiers on the right side of the ravine, but two more moving bodies. One she could only glimpse faintly through the trees, but it seemed to be wielding a red lightsaber.

Without needing to understand, Marasiah acted. One Force-propelled leap took her across the ravine. She no longer had a weapon in hand but she didn't need one. She grabbed hold of the nearest trooper, picked him off his feet, and threw him

head-first into the nearest big tree, hard enough to crack his helmet.

She staggered deeper into the forest to take the others but stumbled over another prone body. To her surprise, it was Yuuzhan Vong, dressed in woven clothes instead of vonduun armor, with scorched blast-marks in the chest. She looked back to the fight and saw the remaining two stormtroopers had dropped to their knees behind the same fallen log. One was firing at the lightsaber-wielding figure; the other had turned to shoot at her.

Marasiah threw up a wall in the Force to block it, just in time. As the trooper fired a second burst another Yuuzhan Vong rushed in from the side. He tackled that stormtrooper, pinning him to the dirt with one hand while the other slashed down repeatedly with an amphistaff. Blood spurted out from the trooper's neck; the Yuuzhan Vong turned on the other soldier and lunged, but the last trooper fired a shot into his gut. Both figures tumbled into the brush together. The Yuuzhan Vong was still but the trooper kicked free and tried to rise.

He was halfway upright when Darth Talon stepped in from the side and beheaded him with one smooth sweep of her lightsaber.

Marasiah stared in shock. Talon, the last of the Sith, *here*. She watched as the red-and-black Twi'lek crouched down next to the Yuuzhan Vong body, felt it for life, and released a disappointed sigh.

Then Talon stood up and turned toward her. Marasiah's mind flashed back to their very first encounter seven years ago on Vendaxa, when Krayt's Hand had murdered her teacher Elke Vetter, then chased her and Astraal into Cade Skywalker's arms.

Talon had seemed a nightmare then. She was a nightmare now. Force-lighting exploded from Marasiah's left hand. Talon's lightsaber snapped up to catch it but the Sith staggered back. She emanated shock and fear in the Force. That was good; Marasiah wanted to be feared. She sent another blast that Talon barely managed to catch; lightning leaped off the Twi'lek's blade and danced across her arms. Her face twisted in pain but she still held the lightsaber up.

One more blast should do it. Marasiah felt raw hate surging up



from her heart, through her arm, all the way to her fingertips.

And then Talon dropped her lightsaber, held out both hands, and shouted, “Stop!”

Marasiah couldn’t stop herself. The lightning blazed out. Talon tried to evade but energy sizzled across her right side. With a cry she dropped to her knees and slumped against the Yuuzhan Vong’s body.

Marasiah wanted her to stand up and fight, just so she could strike her down. Instead the Twi’lek stayed where she was, glaring up at Marasiah with deep blue eyes.

They were jarring against the scarlet-and-black of her face. They made Marasiah wonder if her own eyes blazed red-gold, like the monster from her nightmares.

In a ragged growl, Talon said, “I’ve come to *save* you, you fool. We came...”

She looked at the Yuuzhan Vong’s body. Marasiah was shocked to feel her sadness in the Force.

“These Vong... Who are they? What are you?”

“They were... comrades,” Talon decided.

Scraps of things she’d heard fell into place. “You came with Khat Lah?”

“We answered your distress call.” Awkwardly, Talon started to rise. She picked her lightsaber out of the brush as she did so but didn’t turn it on.

Marasiah risked a glance at the canopy. “Where’s your ship?”

“I don’t know. I cannot feel anything in the Force.” Talon’s eyes narrowed. “Clearly, you can.”

Marasiah wavered on her feet. She, the fourth Fel monarch, pledged to the Force’s light side, had nearly used Force lightning to kill the Sith who’d come to save her.

It couldn’t be real, but it was. She knew that the galaxy had gone mad, but she’d never thought things were this deranged.

Regarding her coolly, Talon said, “We shouldn’t stay here long. Their comrades will come for them.”

Marasiah realized she meant more stormtroopers. She reached out with the Force and sensed that pursuer, getting very close. He was on her scent and hungry for the kill.

“Do you know where to hide here?” asked Talon.

Marasiah stared at those eyes- those *blue* eyes- and muttered, “No. I don’t.”

“Then we run.”

Talon picked a fallen stormtrooper’s rifle off the ground and tossed it to her. Then they ran, together.

Talon’s whole body moved like a perfect machine. She jumped over fallen trees, skipped past every jutting root or stone, and ducked to avoid each hanging branch. All the while she was acutely aware of Marasiah Fel running beside her, keeping perfect pace. Talon’s five senses were on perfect alert and she felt like she could run forever on adrenaline alone.

Yet she was still blind. Marasiah had the Force was surely reaching out even now, tracking their pursuers and trying to keep best distance. She should be able to feel Khat Lah when he approached as well, perhaps even mentally communicate with the Yuuzhan Vong and arrange their extraction.

Talon had none of that. She felt blind but as close to alive as she had in years.

They rushed through the forest, first half-tumbling down a wooded slope, then up a shallow hill, then through a patch of thick brush. They’d be easier to track through that, and Marasiah next led them down another slope, lightly forested, toward a lowland patch gone swampy with rainwater.

It seemed a miserable place to hide, but then Talon saw the outcropping of bare rock on the far side. From that vantage point they’d be able to spot their attackers from a safe range or escape with Khat Lah. The two women exchanged simple looks, conveying understanding, then hurried around the edge of the marsh. With muddy boots it was a challenge to get up the rock, but Marasiah used the Force to assist her climb. With only mild embarrassment, Talon let herself be pulled up as well.

Lying flat atop the rock they had a clear view of the sky above and the marshland below. Assuming their pursuers followed their trail, they’d stumble into the muck and be easy to attack.

“How close are they?” Talon asked. “Can you feel them?”

“I feel them.” Marasiah’s eyes narrowed. “They’re not here, not yet... But they’re following the path we took.”

“That is a start.”

The human glared at her coldly. The reaction was not

surprising, or unjustifiable, but it was frustrating. Talon pressed, "Where is Khat Lah? Can you feel him?"

"I feel... someone in the distance, moving fast. It may be him."

"Can you reach him and guide him here?"

"I can try."

"Then try."

Marasiah glared again, then closed her eyes and reached into the Force. Talon waited impatiently until she opened them. "I think I reached him."

"You *think*?"

"I reached him," the human scowled. "I haven't done this sort of thing in a while."

"Clearly."

The former empress looked back down on the marsh, still empty. "Why *you*?" Marasiah muttered, half to herself. Of all the people in the galaxy..."

"I came because I was with Khat Lah when he was called."

"Yes. I get that."

This wasn't the time or place, but Talon couldn't help from saying, "This is your fault we are in this situation. Not mine."

"My fault?" Marasiah rolled to her side and stared at her. "I didn't call them here. I don't even know how they found me."

"But you are *here*. And so are they."

"Am I supposed to be someplace else?"

They should really stop this, but Talon snapped, "Yes. You were the empress. You have the *Force*. For you to hide here for three years-"

"I was not *hiding*."

"Then were you sulking? Crying over what you lost? With the Force you could have-"

"No," Marasiah scowled. "Don't you dare talk to me about what the Force can or can't do. I-" She stopped and whipped her gaze back to the marsh.

Talon peeked over the outcropping edge. "What is it? Are they coming?"

"No," she breathed. "He's here."

Eli came at her from the side. He'd felt it in the Force when his quarry stopped moving, and when his recon scout had

reported a wetland patch crowned by one high rock, he knew instantly where she'd be. He'd split his troopers in two so that they could come out of the forest and trap Marasiah on either flank, and when they sprung the trap Eli was at the front of the charge, bursting out of the brush from her right side. He used the Force to ascend the rocky incline in seconds, ahead of his troops.

For the entirety of this long grueling chase, Eli had braced himself for a battle against a truly powerful Force-user. It was a challenge he'd resolve himself to face, win or lose.

He we prepared to see Marasiah Fel crouched atop the rock. He froze, stunned, at the sight of Darth Talon.

The shock was mutual. His former master's blue eyes went wide. Her hand was on her lightsaber but she didn't squeeze it on. Marasiah recovered faster and fired off a round of laser blasts from her rifle while still laying on her side. Eli batted back the kill shots and sent out a push in the Force, hoping to knock both women off the rock and into the mud below.

Instead, Marasiah pushed back with one of her own, effectively neutralizing the thrust. By now some stormtroopers had climbed to the top of the rock, as per Eli's orders they unleashed stun bolts only. Eli tried to move on Marasiah- she was the priority- but Talon sprung to her feet and intercepted him. Her red blade sizzled against his white; Eli stepped back and swept, but she parried and continued to bar his way.

Eli didn't understand how she, a Sith, could be helping the empress. He had no idea what had become of her in the past three years; he'd frankly assumed she was dead. Yet here she was, blocking his every thrust and forcing him back to the edge of the outcropping.

As shock receded Eli gathered his senses. The Talon he'd trained under had been a creature of beautiful, savage, lethal grace. Every pound of her body had moved in flow with the Force and he'd never even dreamed he might best her in combat.

But things had changed. Marasiah might be wielding the Force- he could feel it crackling through her, even as he battled Talon- but his old master could not. She was still Force-deaf and her movements, while nimble and fluid, lacked their old elegance.

With the Force on his side he could beat his old master. He could even kill her. Knowledge bred confidence and Eli went on the attack. His blows were fast and Talon struggled to catch up with them. After years of training he knew his master's favorite strikes and was able to block her counterattacks with ease.

Talon knew she was losing. He felt her fear, but also her resolve. He couldn't imagine what path could have led her to die on this hill, bravely fighting to protect the former empress. Against himself Eli found he wanted to know. He wanted to understand what losing the Force had done to his master.

He dared hope it had changed her for the better. If so, it would be final proof that he'd made the right choice on Rohakalla, one not even Kyra could deny.

All the sadder that he'd have to kill her now.

Eli slipped his first attack past her defenses. She sidestepped to avoid the thrust but it skidded across her side, leaving a black scorch. Talon's face twisted in pain and without the Force to soothe it she was helpless as Eli attacked again. She barely kept hold of her lightsaber as he caught his blade on her own. Just a little more, now. With the Force, he urged her to surrender.

And then a blaze of light flared behind them. Both looked back to the other side of the outcropping and the whirlwind what was Marasiah Fel. She'd been using her blaster against the troopers but they'd been coming at her from all sides and she'd had no place to cover. Instead of running she'd held her ground, dropped her weapon, and called on greater strength.

The energy that swirled around her, pushing stormtroopers away and throwing some off the outcropping, was rage and hate made manifest. Its raw power was something he'd only felt from the most powerful Sith, and as he watched one trooper, too close to the blaze, was caught in it. Crackling blue-white bolts dissolved half his body, rending armor and flesh and bone.

Eli was too shocked to move; so was Talon. Together, they were thrown back, away from Marasiah and off the outcropping. They plunged together into the mud below.

Frantically, Eli pushed himself out of the muck and groped for his lightsaber. He found it, held it into the air, and turned it

on. By then Talon was on her knees with her own weapon in hand. She squeezed it, but no blade ignited. She looked at him with empty eyes, expecting death. Above them, Marasiah's blaze finally flickered out. The dark light went away and Eli could feel the former empress wilt in exhaustion.

In the sudden quiet Talon rasped, "Do it. Kill me."

She was staring at his white blade. Eli stayed where he was, knee-deep in muck, and asked, "What happened to the empress? What *is* she?"

He was asking if she, Darth Talon, had taught Marasiah the powers of the dark side. It was the only explanation he could think of for what he'd just seen.

But Talon shook her head. "I don't know," she said, and her voice trembled with fear.

And Eli understood that Talon was still lost, just like the empress was still lost. He wasn't, though. He had his purpose, his mission.

"Surrender!" he barked at her.

But his old master said, "No. Kill me."

He'd expected nothing else. Gripping his humming saber in both hands, Eli took one step forward, then other, and raised the blade over his head for a fatal blow, hands trembling.

And then fresh roaring filled the air. Eli and Talon looked up to see the clear sky above the outcropping filled with the belly of the Sekotan flyer. Its landing ramp lowered and five Yuuzhan Vong warriors fell onto the rock. A sixth tumbled through the air, past the outcropping and down to the edge of the marsh. The figure landed in a squat, but even before he raised his gray-haired head Eli knew who it would be.

Marasiah Fel, Darth Talon, and now Khat Lah. Hogrum Chalk had no idea what enemies were arrayed against him. How could he? It truly was a galaxy gone mad.

Khat Lah stared at Eli from five meters away. There was no surprise in his eyes; in the Force he emanated melancholy sadness. With one hand he hefted his amphistaff in a defensive position. With the other, he made a slight gesture and raised Talon out of the mud. She landed softly on the earth beside him, and when she squeezed her lightsaber again, the red sword blazed bright.

Eli stared at them both, not turning off his lightsaber and not

moving to attack. He didn't know if he could take them together. He didn't want to try. He only wanted to understand.

But they told him nothing. Together, Khat Lah and Talon bounded for the outcropping. The Yuuzhan Vong propelled himself upward with the Force and took the Twi'lek with him. Eli stood in the mud, head tilted back, and watched them as they made a last leaping ascent into the belly of the flyer, right after the warrior cradling Marasiah's limp body in his arms.

And then, standing in the mud, he watched the flyer soar into the air and dwindle to nothing in the clear blue sky.

The climb out of Milagro's atmosphere was so steep, Talon was pinned to the back wall of the hold along with the others who'd rushed down to save her. Marasiah Fel's unconscious body was sprawled next to Xahn Carr, who'd taken her up off the rock.

As the ship trembled through the atmosphere, Talon asked, "Are there TIEs in pursuit?"

"We cleared them" said Khat Lah, "But the frigate is coming to intercept."

"We rescued some of the shapers," Xahn Carr added, "As many as we could."

But not all. "I couldn't save Neshri Buhl," she told them, small tremor in her voice. She'd never thought of that Yuuzhan Vong, or any of them, as friends, but he'd been a comrade in battle and she should have saved him. His death burned her with shame and something more; an ache of emptiness. Maybe this was grief.

"You recovered the empress," said Khat Lah. "This is enough."

But she wasn't the empress anymore. As the flyer started sailing smooth, free of atmosphere, Marasiah's eyelids began to twitch. Emerging consciousness or bad dreams, Talon wasn't sure which. She wasn't sure any of them were safe with the power the human could awaken.

"You saw what happened when they attacked her," she told the Yuuzhan Vong. "The power she used-"

"Was of the dark side," Khat Lah said grimly. "Does that frighten you?"

Yes, it frightened Talon very much. Even if she'd been the

one wielding that raw destructive strength, it would have scared her.

“She is out of danger now,” said Khat Lah. “We will do for her what we can.”

Talon didn’t know what they could or should do. Scions of Skywalker had fallen to the dark side before, and if it happened to Marasiah, Talon knew it would happen not for hate or anger but deeper despair.

With one last shudder, the flyer leaped to hyperspace. Internal gravity evened out and they were no longer pressed against the rear wall. Despite that, none of them moved.

“What now?” Talon asked.

“We have a destination,” said Khat Lah. “It seems there is a convergence we must attend, at Bavinyar.”

Talon didn’t understand what they could do at Bavinyar. Then she noticed the former empress. Marasiah’s eyes were open. Lying limp on the floor, head in Xahn Carr’s lap, the woman stared at the ceiling. On her face was not surprise or confusion, but sad acceptance.



## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

Rain fell hard on an alien landscape, dissolving jagged mountain ridges in violet curtains as the planet turned into twilight. Assuming this was a planet at all; Anakin had gone to many strange worlds and seen things he'd never imagined as a boy in Mos Espa, but he'd never encountered a place as fundamentally bizarre as this.

More than the inconstant weather, beyond even the gnarled trees that glowed in the night and islands of stone that floated inexplicably in the sky, this place felt strange in the Force. There was great power here; it seemed to permeate the air and seep up through cracks in the stony ground, and it was a power half-formed and easily malleable. Anakin had no idea if this power was born from the planet, if that was what it was; he remembered approaching the great, eight-sided double-pyramid in his shuttle, only to be swallowed by light and wake up to sunshine and a lush jungle. Perhaps the power came from the planet; perhaps it came from the inhabitants.

They, too, were unlike any beings he'd ever met. There had been three of them; there seemed to be no other sentient or even animal life in this strange place. Living in his tall mountaintop monastery, an ancient long-bearded man called the Father. In a nearby cathedral of red-stained glass and black stone, a Son. And finally, a luminous Daughter. They looked like humans but Anakin knew those were only shapes; several times they had transformed at will before his eyes.

They had been three, but now they were two.

The Daughter was dead, killed by a thrust of some mystic

blade, aimed at the Father and held by the Son.

Anakin could not shake the feeling it was his fault. He did not understand these strange beings, didn't even know if they were real, but he found it easy to understand the passions that drove them. The Daughter had seemed like the embodiment of the Force's light side, selfless and self-sacrificing. The Son, with his molten eyes and black armor, had seemed like the worst Sith, though he'd denied it (The Son had said Anakin would destroy the Sith, *and* the Jedi. He shuddered at the thought). Finally there was the ancient Father, who'd tried and failed to keep the balance between them.

Perhaps if Anakin and his companions had never come here—if they'd never heard the strange distress call, been sent by the Jedi Council, and gotten swallowed by the inexplicable double-pyramid in space—then none of this would have happened. The three Force-wielders had been shocked and intrigued to discover that Anakin was the so-called Chosen One. The Father had set to test his powers by making Anakin defend his companions, Obi-Wan and Ashoka, against the Son and Daughter. When Anakin had seemingly passed the test, the Father had insisted that Anakin must stay here and replace him as balance-keeper between the opposing children.

Of course, Anakin had balked. All his life the prophecy that he'd bring balance to the Force had filled him with anxiety and even revulsion. He wanted to be powerful of course, greater than any Jedi alive, but he also shirked at the responsibilities the prophecy heaped upon him. If forced to choose between being the Force's savior and Padmé's husband he'd chose the latter, no hesitation. So he'd refused the Father's offer, and the Son and Daughter had set to fighting, and now the seeming embodiment of the Force's light side was dead. Even now, somewhere in that rain-shrouded landscape, her Father was putting her in a grave.

Where they'd heard the prophecy of the Chosen One, Anakin couldn't guess, given they'd supposedly been locked here for countless millennia. That was another point in favor of it being a dream, along with the inexplicable appearance of Qui-Gon's ghost, and of course the surreal, ever-changing landscape itself.

But it didn't feel like a dream. For all its strangeness there was a constancy, a solidity here. He could feel his companions in

the Force and they felt clear as ever, anchors in a strange sea. As Anakin sat in the cockpit of their crashed shuttle, watching the rain and darkening sky, he could sense Obi-Wan standing thoughtfully at the rear access hatch, and Ashoka putting all her industry into repairs the ship's scrambled guts. *They* were real; he was sure of that if nothing else.

If the rest of this was real too, Anakin found himself drawn to an inescapable conclusion. The prophecy that had hounded him since first meeting Qui-Gon all those years ago had been leading him to this place. Not even expecting it, he'd stumbled into the climax of the story of his life. He had to do something to rebalance a Force knocked perilously toward the dark side.

He'd balked before, out of knee-jerk fear and resentment of his destiny. A beautiful, luminous being was dead because of that. He couldn't leave the Father and the Son here to destroy each other, especially when their struggle might affect the whole galaxy. There was a mess he'd made, and only he could clean it up.

Obi-wan wouldn't like it; unlike Qui-Gon, he'd never bought wholly into the Chosen One myth. Ashoka might offer to help, but she'd already been overpowered by the Son once, and Anakin would never forgive himself if something happened to her. He had to face his destiny alone, whatever it might be.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed himself out of the pilot's seat and moved toward the rear of the shuttle. A portion of the floor in the aft hold had been removed and Ashoka was currently inside the compartment; from her muttered swears it sounded like she was hard at work and Anakin didn't bother her. He wished they'd brought R2-D2 along on this mission; the little astromech droid had an uncanny ability to fix any conceivable problem and would have been useful now. Over the years Anakin had come to trust the droid as much as any person, maybe more than anyone besides Padmé. He'd done his share of modifications on the astromech in that time, adding new instruments and tools to his arsenal and rewriting his memory storage algorithms to allow R2 to retain more experiential data. In some small way, it had made the droid seem more human.

But for now they had to make do without R2. Anakin went to the open rear hatch and saw Obi-wan standing outside, protected from rain by the shuttle's cantilevered hull, watching

water fall with quiet, thoughtful consternation. It was a very Obi-wan way to pass the time.

Obi-wan sensed Anakin come up behind him and said, "I'm getting a little tired of how unreliable the weather is here."

Anakin sat down on the edge of the hatch. "Some might say that's part of the appeal."

Obi-wan turned to face him. More softly he said, "You did well, Anakin. How do you feel?"

Anakin sighed. Facing Obi-wan, who deserved only to break free of this place, he found it harder to stay the course he'd chosen. "I'm not sure we're doing the right thing by leaving. The son is consumed by the dark side."

He almost said: the son *is* the dark side. Maybe in some way he was. It was all far beyond him.

But Obi-wan shook his head. "If we stay, we may be used to the dark side's advantage."

That was very possible; the son had already possessed Ashoka, pitting her in battle against Anakin and Obi-wan. Thankfully, the young Togruta didn't remember any of it. When the Jedi Council had assigned her to Anakin as an apprentice he'd resented it, but in time he'd come to appreciate, trust, and even care for her. He wondered if he wasn't paralleling, Obi-wan, who'd started training Anakin solely out of a sense of debt to Qui-Gon. All these years later, they were almost like brothers.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Ashoka popped out of the maintenance pit behind them. Pushing goggles onto her forehead and planting elbows on the deck grate she asked, "Do you want the bad news or the *really* bad news?"

Obi-wan tried for good humor. "Well, let's try the bad news, laced with a little optimism."

"We've got two cracked gyro pins, a busted power converter, the engines should be fired twice to dump debris, and the backup vents need charging."

"Sounds terribly downbeat."

Ashoka gave them a smile that was wry, almost impish, then ducked back down. As Obi-wan went inside, Anakin saw an opening. There was no point in more hesitation; as Obi-wan walked to the maintenance pit, Anakin went to the port-side storage closet and removed the repulsor-bike from its restraints.

As he nudged the small speeder toward the open hatch, Obi-wan asked Ashoka, "Can it be fixed?"

From the pit she replied, "I can re-route the primary initiator, weld the dampening vents, and that might get us enough power to break the atmosphere. After that, I have no guarantee she'll hold together."

"We'll take our chances. Better than staying here."

Obi-wan, looking thoughtful and consternated again, walked back outside. Anakin was right behind him and pushed the speeder bike over bare rock. Rain still pounded the earth around them but in the distance Anakin could see another fast weather change coming up; clouds parted to reveal stars and two moons, close together and brilliant. Ashoka had talked about breaking atmosphere, like they could get free of this place like a normal planet. Given how they'd entered Anakin doubted escape would be so easy, and that was another reason he had to go.

"Where are you going?" Obi-wan asked as he straddled the bike.

"To see the Father. I'm not convinced the Son can be contained here without our help. Perhaps we should make a stand."

"Anakin--"

"If I don't get the Father's blessing to leave... it will haunt me forever."

If he left business here unfinished- if he turned his back on destiny and failed to fix the mess he'd made- it truly would stay with him the rest of his life. Anakin didn't know what he could accomplish by speaking to the Father now; maybe they might join forces to kill the son. Maybe he'd have to take the Father's place as ruler of this strange world, keeper of the balance between darkness and light.

There was no way of knowing. All Anakin could do was decide. Resolving to face the consequences, whatever they might be, Anakin pushed his speeder bike into motion and soared away, leaving his friends behind. As he rushed across the alien landscape the rain died and the clouds parted, leaving him alone in a cold and starlit night.



PART III



EVERYTHING THAT RISES  
MUST CONVERGE





## Chapter Twenty-One

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Bavinyar's ocean surged and receded, rose and fell, occasional whitecap waves breaking the monotony of deep-blue water that reflected the textureless color of the sky.

And then, the explosion. Water geysered ten meters in the air and fell back to the sea, sending ripples that distorted the uneven mass of waves into widening concentric circles. When the foam died down the rounded, oval shape of the airspeeder/submersible could be seen, bobbing slightly on the ocean surface.

"There it is," Azlyn Rae said, "Take us down."

It hadn't been necessary to give the order. The pilot of her amphibious transport, a Mon Calamari member of the same survey team that had discovered the Tho Yor beneath the ocean, was already cutting altitude and lowering them to the same spot.

Azlyn was anxious; she couldn't help it. She and Master Rasi Tuum were the first Jedi to arrive on Bavinyar, but they were still too late to have caught Marin Solo before she went down to make contact with the ancient ark. As they were still without the Force, there was little Azlyn or Rasi Tuum could do with the Tho Yor, but just knowing the black pyramid was waiting a kilometer beneath them filled her with tension, excitement, and even hope.

The pilot guided them to the ocean surface and laid them to rest behind the recently-emerged craft. The Mon Cal tapped the communications panel and said, "This is Mokhvar. Sauk, Wreskar, are you there?"

A gruff voice replied, "We're here, Mokhvar."

“Did you locate and contact the Tho Yor?” asked Rasi Tuum. There was a pause, then new voice, one Azlyn vaguely recognized as Sauk’s, said, “There’s been complications.”

Azlyn should have expected that. “Can we speak to Marin Solo?”

“Not right now.” Another grave pause. “You’d better come aboard.”

Mokhvar nudged their amphibious craft alongside Sauk’s. The speeders were of similar models and magnetized their hulls to keep together on the churning waves. Instead of connecting via airlock, Azlyn and Rasi Tuum had to get out of their own craft and step carefully across the water-flecked deck to the other.

There was little room inside the cabin, and Rasi Tuum hovered in the doorway rather than try to squeeze his bulk inside. Azlyn slipped fully through, and her eyes instantly locked the on the gray-haired woman lying face-up on the cabin’s deck. It looked like she’d been hastily removed from her pressure suit, which hung deflated off the wall. Sauk and a Quarren, apparently Wreskar, crouched on either side of her while the assassin droid AG-37 had compacted himself to fit in the rear of the cabin.

Azlyn crouched next to Marin and saw the old woman’s eyes were open, staring into nothing. Small tremors twitched her face and her fingers were trembling. Despite that her breathing looked regular.

“What is this?” gasped Azlyn. “Did the Tho Yor do this?”

“I think so,” said Sauk. “After Marin went into her suit she got close to the pyramid. This... portal of light opened up and swallowed her. Maybe thirty seconds later, it spat her back out.”

“She didn’t reply when we commed her so we had to recover her manually,” added Wreskar. Azlyn wondered if the Quarren had any idea what kind of mission he’d been enlisted in.

Sauk added, “This sounds like what happened to Cade Skywalker, after *he* went into the Tho Yor. They say he came out of it on his own after a couple of hours...”

“How long ago did you recover her?” growled Rasi Tuum.

“Less than ten minutes,” said Wreskar. “I think we should get her medical attention.”

Azlyn tensed. Whisking Marin off to a hospital would alert

more people to their discovery, which was the last thing they wanted, and it sounded likely a hospital wouldn't know what to do with her anyway.

Fortunately, AG-37 said, "*Free Agent* has a competent sick bay where we can perform neural scans and evaluate her condition."

"Good idea," said Azlyn. "We'd better get her moving."

"I will go back to the other craft and tell Mokhvar to return to base," said Raasi Tuum. "Azlyn, please stay with the patient."

Azlyn nodded and watched the Cathar go. A minute later the hatch was sealed and the other airspeeder detached from theirs. Wreskar moved to the front control panel and commanded their own to rise skyward. Once they'd attained a steady altitude he fired engines and propelled them over the ocean, on the long trip back to the nearest floating refugee camp.

Azlyn mostly watched Marin's rapid movements and unblinking eyes. Cautiously, she reached out to take one trembling hand and squeeze lightly. The shaking stopped but Marin didn't squeeze back, and nothing else changed.

"What do we do now?" Sauk asked weakly.

"You heard what A-gee said. Get her to sick bay, and then get her stable. Hopefully she'll wake up in a couple hours. If not, we might have to risk a run to a hospital."

He shook his head. "All the doctors in this camp are used to treating Mon Cals and Quarren. We might find *some* who are familiar with human neurology..."

But the real experts would be among the human-populated islands, like the capital Cephalia. That would definitely start ringing alarms. Azlyn felt torn; Marin might be suffering serious damage, and delaying they might make it worse. But to take her to a human hospital would blow their secret wide.

"Take her to *Free Agent* for now," she said. "Do you know how to contact the rebels?"

From the rear of the cabin, AG-37 said, "We have that capacity."

"Then I think you should let them know what's going on and ask for backup."

Sauk blinked huge eyes. "What do you mean? Aren't the Jedi coming to help?"

"Yes, but Master Tuum and I are the only ones here right

now. Some are coming from the other side the galaxy and won't be here for days." Azlyn lowered her voice. "And to be honest, we can't fight a war for you. Even when we *did* all have the Force..." She shook her head. "There were always limits."

"The resistance has very limited resources," AG-37 warned. "They may not be able to help."

"We can at least ask."

"Do you really think Chalk will find out about this so quickly?" asked Sauk. "I've done everything I can to keep it secret. The Resettlement Authority has even barred the local government from these waters."

"I know. But word gets out. We don't know when there'll be a reaction, but there will be one, and we have to be ready."

The Mon Cal nodded grimly. Azlyn didn't need the Force to know what he was thinking. He'd come to Bavinyar to find a peaceful life with his own kind. He'd settled into stable work the Resettlement Authority and maybe found himself a mate to raise a school with. His days of adventure and danger were behind him, or so he'd thought.

Well, things never went the way you planned. Just when you thought you were settled, something sudden happened and upended everything you knew. It was the story of Azlyn's life. At this point, she was as close to used to it as could be, and whatever happened next she was prepared to ride the waves.

Hogrum Chalk's typical day was packed with annoyances both routine and unexpected. The report of failure from Eli Horn had been neither of those things; both pragmatic and pessimistic, he'd braced himself for any outcome.

That Marasiah had escaped Milagro with the help of a shipful of Yuuzhan Vong and a former Sith assassin had shocked even him. He had no idea what that could mean for the future of his government. If Marasiah had been alive all this time, why hadn't she helped the rebels? And would being chased off Milagro finally stir her to action? In theory, she could topple his government with a few select comm transmissions. In doing so she'd spark chaos, possibly another war.

Hogrum was in no mood, therefore, to deal with an unexpected annoyance. When his aide Astraal Vao came into his office, saying that Senators Gahan and Jacovi were outside

and demanding to speak with him, the regent barely held in a volley of curses. Astraal had been an inheritance from Marasiah, and while she was competent enough in most tasks, she was too weak-willed and pliable to turn back insistent visitors. Hogrum would have released her from her position years ago, were it not for the fact that her brother Shado was a Jedi. He'd hoped keeping her close- and bugging her personal communications systems- might give him hints as to what the Jedi were doing in their quest to bring back the Force. Unfortunately Shado Vao had turned hermit on a backwater world; nonetheless, Hogrum kept Astraal on, just in case.

He was tempted to chase her out of the office now, but composed himself. An unexplained outburst would raise questions; more, he found himself curious. Monia Gahan was, of course, the representative for the survivors from Dac, Mon Cal and Quarren alike. Alin Jacovi represented the Farstine sector and specifically his homeworld of Bavinyar. Those two often butted heads over the resettlement operation, and he'd lost count of the number of times one had come to him complaining about the other. That they'd found enough agreement to come to his office together peaked his interest.

So, settling a baleful look at Astraal, he relented. "All right, Miss Vao. Send them in."

The Twi'lek bowed obediently, then stepped outside. Mere seconds later, Gahan and Jacovi arrived. They might have agreed to come together but they couldn't agree on who'd go through the door first. They smashed shoulders as they pressed through but Jacovi reached his desk first.

"Regent, thank you for seeing us on short notice." The senator, a middle-aged human with a trim, graying beard, exuded angry energy. But at least he'd remembered formalities.

"Senators, take a seat." Hogrum gestured to the two modest chairs on their side of the desk. Maybe if they sat down they'd calm down.

Gahan dropped into her set first. Jacovi reluctantly followed, but leaned forward so far he was inches from falling out. "Regent, I would like to express my government's firm displeasure with the actions of the Resettlement Authority."

"Which specific actions, Senator?"

"The Authority's cartographic teams have been granted

license to chart our oceans between latitudes fifty and seventy degrees north, longitudes sixty to one-hundred east of the meridian.”

“Among four other habitable, aquatic zones,” Gahan put in. “We’ve already started construction of one settlement within that range.”

“Yes, on approval of the Federation Arbitration Commission,” Jacovi wagged a finger. “However, they did *not* grant you permission to settle south of the sixtieth latitude. You’ve only been given a right to explore there.”

“And explore is all we have done,” said the Mon Cal, quite reasonable.

“If exploration is *all* you’re doing south of the sixtieth, why have you refused to allow us passage in those waters?”

“We haven’t barred your people passage anywhere,” insisted Gahan. “We’ve merely marked off portion of the ocean to be accessed with extreme caution.”

“Cephalia’s governor sent out several scouting expeditions, both air- and sea-based, into the zone south of the sixtieth longitude and east of latitude eighty.” Jacovi turned a meaningful gaze on Hogrum. “They were all turned away by patrol ships used by the Resettlement Authority.”

“And your people didn’t try to force the issue?” Hogrum asked.

“The confrontations were heated. We thought it best to withdraw and protest peacefully, to the highest channels.” Jacovi edged back into his chair, as though he’d said his piece.

Hogrum looked to Gahan. “What kind of safety concerns leads you to cordon off such a huge part of the ocean?”

“Regent, I just finished speaking with a chief cartographer for the Resettlement Committee. He says their most recent expedition discovered a potentially volatile volcano breaking through the ocean floor. He insisted that for everyone’s safety the area must be cleared until drones can estimate the risk of eruption.”

“A volcanic site? There?” Jacovi shook his head. “My people have been on Bavinyar far longer than yours, Senator. There’s never been any tectonic activity in that portion of our world.”

“That you have *noticed*. But as we all know, Senator, your people have been content to settle on Bavinyar’s islands.

You've left the vast majority of its ocean unexplored. Otherwise we wouldn't need to do these charting missions in the first place."

"If there *is* dangerous volcanic activity in the region, why hasn't the Authority published its proof?"

"I can't say. I'm not a geologist. Are you? I expect they wish to survey the area further and make expert consultations before making a public statement." A little coyly, Gahan added, "Scientists are generally more patient than politicians."

"How long has this area been cordoned off?" Hogrum asked.

"Less than two standard days." She turned one large eye to Jacovi. "The senator is making a fuss over nothing, I assure you."

"This isn't *just* about a strip of ocean," the human insisted. "As part of our agreement with Empress Fel, the Bavinyari agreed to cede ocean space to settlers from Dac, but *not* our right to access that territory. This was a key part of her provisions. That ocean is *ours* as much as theirs and we will not be forbidden access to part of our own home."

Gahan sighed. "Senator, your people have never used those waters. It was never your home."

Hogrum was used to this kind of bickering. After hearing the issue, he was almost glad Astraal had forced the senators on him. This was a small problem, easy to solve and a relief from his bigger woes.

Drumming fingers on the desktop he said, "Senator Gahan, talk to the Resettlement Authority. Tell them I want preliminary results from their survey on my desk within a standard day. It doesn't have to be polished or final, I just want to see what you're dealing with. Until then, Senator Jacovi, your people will abide by the Authority's request and stay clear of the area."

Muscles in the man's neck tightened. "And after you receive the results?"

"I'm no geologist either, but I'll have the best ones in the Federation look at the data. My scientists will work with the Resettlement Authority and together they'll draw up a plan. Naturally, we'll keep Cephalia abreast of everything and consult with them before making out final decision."

Reluctantly, Jacovi nodded. The human Bavinyari had a long

history of stubbornly resisting authority; they'd been founded by settlers fleeing the Old Republic in its waning years and had staged a fierce, if futile, resistance to Palpatine's new Empire. They were currently unhappy with the refugees they were being saddled with and unhappy with the Federation that had saddled them. But for now, it seemed, they'd behave themselves.

Hogrum thought the matter finished, but Gahan said, "I assure you, there's no need to go to such lengths. While we appreciate the offer, Regent, the Authority already had some of the best underwater geologists in the galaxy. I've been told they're well on their way to assessing the situation now."

"Then they'll have no trouble submitting a report for review by tomorrow."

"Of course it's possible, sir, but I really think—"

"You two came here asking me to arbitrate. I've arbitrated," he said firmly. It was like trying to deal fairly with children. Sometimes he got so sick of these politicians' petty squabbles he wanted to blast the whole senate to ash. "My decision is made. Both of you will abide by it."

Gahan and Jacovi exchanged awkward looks. The human said, "Of course, Regent. I'll relay word to Cephalia."

"And I will contact the Authority," Gahan said with a wet sigh.

The two of them rose as one. This time Gahan staggered slightly behind to let Jacovi through the door first. Neither of them looked back as they left.

Hogrum sighed and stayed behind his desk. The dilemma he'd solved was so minor and petty, and nothing had been settled yet. Gahan's attempt at last-minute obstruction had surprised him, and he tried to puzzle it out once she was gone. His request had been simple and, he thought, quite fair. It was almost as though Gahan had been hiding something.

He had no idea what could be worth hiding on the ocean floor of a planet like Bavinyar. There were some mineral deposits on the southern hemisphere that miners had been working for a century; perhaps they'd discovered a great lode of something buried in the northern ocean.

Yes, that made sense. Per the agreement Marasiah had made with Cephalia, the refugees had something of a finders-keepers policy on the territory they'd chart. They were probably trying



to keep their webbed hands on something lucrative.

It was all so petty. Hogrum had grown sick of managing little beings and their little squabbles, but someone had to do it, and it had been decades since he'd trusted anyone's judgment except his own. He certainly didn't trust Jacovi or Gahan. So he turned on the comm system attached to his desk and prepared a call. Though he'd nominally surrendered leadership of Federation intelligence on becoming regent, he still kept a direct line to many competent lieutenants in that organization. There were already some agents on Bavinyar acting as independent observers of both the human government and the Resettlement Authority. They could easily look into this, and likely bribe someone in the Authority to pass along the real results of those cartographic missions. Then he'd compare them to what Monia Gahan would give him tomorrow and decide how much she was lying.

Small beings, small problems, small solutions. Hogrum made the call and gave the order. Then, finally, he allowed himself to contemplate his greater threats.

As they were effectively stuck inside the safehouse by the Western Sea with no way off-planet, it had seemed to Saara, Jao Assam, and Yalta Val that there was nothing left for them to do and nothing that could happen. The bred frustration, most of all in Jao, but Saara too. They'd laid the groundwork for the mission to rescue Gar Stazi, but the admiral's fate was effectively out of their hands now. All they could do was wait.

And then, instead of nothing happening, it all came at once. First, using an old Rogue Squadron code transmitted to the safehouse's secure comm unit, Anj Dahl had told them that a request had come from the Jedi for assistance on Bavinyar. Since the planet was, more or less, Monia Gahan's home turf, Saara had passed an enquiry to the senator using the same code. Monia had been aware of the situation but confused. Saara's message- that an object of great interest to the Jedi had been found inside the exclusion zone, on the bottom of the ocean floor- hadn't done much to clarify things for the Mon Calamari before she went off to discuss things with the regent and Senator Jacovi.

When she got back, Monia reported, "The regent's asked the

Resettlement Authority to submit its data on the site. I told him that was unnecessary, but he didn't budge."

"You can't give him that information," Jao said urgently. The former Imperial Knight had been on-edge since coming here; the revelation from Bavinyar seemed to have pushed him over the brink. "If Chalk finds out what's down there, he will *attack* Bavinyar. He'll take a star destroyer and pulverize the planet."

Monia's image blinked large eyes in disbelief. "Surely you exaggerate."

"No. He already did it once on Tython." Jao leaned close to the comm system. "The object they've found- the Tho Yor- is the key to reestablishing a connection with the Force."

Monia blinked again. "That is... quite an assertion."

"It's the truth. It has to be protected."

"As I understand it," said Val, "There's already some Jedi on Bavinyar. They've been working with the Resettlement Authority."

"Right," said Jao. "My friend Sauk's with the Authority. He's the one who gave the heads-up in the first place, and he's probably the one who got them to put up the exclusion zone."

"Which aroused the ire of Cephalia, and now the regent," sighed Monia.

"Listen, you have to stall Chalk. Get the Authority to send him false data."

"That is... extremely risky."

"Then don't say anything. *We'll* get in touch with Sauk and have *him* send bad data."

The senator looked like her head was spinning, and Saaraï wasn't much better. Jao was fiercely intent on protecting that Tho Yor. The man's desire to have the Force back was intense, verging on desperate.

For Saaraï, the situation was much more complicated.

"I will try to stall Chalk as best I can," said Monia, "But I will not do anything illegal."

Jao looked ready to snap, but Saaraï soothed, "We understand your position, Senator, and we know what risks you took just to contact us. Thank you. We'll be in touch."

Before Jao could say more, she closed the link. Monia's holo disappeared. As calmly as she could, Saaraï told him, "There's not much we can do here. You have to accept that."

“There’s not much I can do about *anything*,” Jao growled. His hands turned to fists. “Not about the Bavinyar, not about Ania. I’m *sick* of being helpless.”

Val put a hand on his shoulder. “Calm yourself, Jao. We won’t help anything by being rash.”

“We can’t help anything at all,” he scowled.

The older Knight looked to Saara. “We should get back to the resistance and give them an update. They might even be able to help.”

A reasonable request, but as Saara programmed the comm device to hail Anj Dahl, it was hard to steady her thoughts. As part of the resistance leadership, she’d been kept vaguely aware of the search for another Tho Yor. The Jedi had been scouring far and wide for any hint of an ancient ark that might, apparently, lead to another gateway through which the Force might be recovered. All the while she’d silently dreaded such a discovery, and after three years she’d comforted herself with the thought that they’d probably never find it.

But all that was over. *Bavinyar*. She couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that the Tho Yor had been waiting for them there, of all places. A Jedi would start talking about the Will of the Force now. She hated that, just as she hated the Force. As a Sith apprentice she’d been taught to draw strength from it and command its will, but no one, especially not the Sith, really had power over the magnificent, inexplicable energy. Her father had thought himself a master, and his arrogance had doomed him. So, too, Darth Krayt, and every Sith who’d gone before. Saara knew the dark side, and she knew its intoxicating power that promised everything but delivered doom.

Even before she’d lost the Force, Saara had been slowly losing faith in what she’d been taught. She’d imposed herself at Porat’s side in hopes of using him, but his bravery and idealism had shown her pathways no Sith could have dreamed off. Later, he’d offered her love and forgiveness. Her father had said those things were delusion, but her father had been wrong about that and so much else.

As she finished punching in the code, a chill ran through Saara’s body. She was terrified of the Force. She had to admit that. She had no idea what would happen once it came back. Maybe the purity of light would smother her; maybe she’d fall

back to intoxicating darkness. All she knew was that the person she'd become over the past four years, liberated from the Force, would be enslaved again.

With slightly shaking hands she entered the code and stared at the console's blinking green diode, afraid to even punch in the call. When Val asked, "Are we ready?" she nearly jumped.

But she composed herself, nodded, and pressed the button. Thirty seconds later, Anj Dahl's face re-appeared over the console. Jao jumped in before Saaraï could, quickly explaining their conversation with Monia.

"Time's running out," he insisted, "Do you know if anyone's gone down there to contact the Tho Yor?"

"I've been told *somebody* has... Still not sure who," Anj said. "Apparently that person, whoever they are, is still recovering from the... after-effects."

"I've heard about those," Jao nodded. "But is the Tho Yor still on the ocean floor?"

"The object hasn't budged, no."

"Well, Chalk will be coming for it, probably within a few days."

"Wait a minute," Anj said, "You said all he wants is the survey data—"

"They have to send him a fake package. Get online with Sauk and tell him that. Tell him *I* told him that."

"Wait, wait, wait," Anj waved both hands. "I can tell them that. Fine. But we've got our hands full right now."

Saaraï's heart rose. "Is the operation to Selvaris underway?"

"The team should be inserting into the system any minute now." Anj glanced at Jao. "Your friend Kyra's with them."

The man took a breath as that sunk in. It allowed Saaraï a word in edgewise. "What kind of forces have you committed to Selvaris?"

"Nearly everything we could spare. The insertion team is pretty small- just twenty people- but we've got half the fleet on standby. Remember, there's not much in that system but it's right close to Bilbringi. As soon as they realize something's wrong at the prison, they can call a whole fleet for backup."

The resistance only had a meager fraction of what the Federation stocked at Bilbringi alone. Hopefully Saaraï asked, "So you don't have the forces to commit to Bavinyar?"

Anj shook her head. "No, especially not in the timeframe you're talking about. I'm sorry."

"You have to do *something*," Jao pleaded. "This could be the key to defeating Chalk."

The pilot looked skeptical. "Are you saying the Jedi could help us win the fight? I don't think you're in the position to make those promises. You're not even one of them."

"Captain Dahl," Val interjected, "I am still an Imperial Knight and I can promise you this. If the Force *does* come back to us, I will be able to share all I've learned. The Knights will never stand with Chalk, knowing all he's done."

"That's good, Master Val, but we both know your Knights aren't close to Chalk like they were to the empress."

"She's right," said Saarai with feigned regret. "I'm sure the Knights and Jedi will help all they can... But I don't know what it will amount to. Chalk has a whole navy on his side."

Jao sighed. "Captain Dahl, let's be honest. The resistance is weak. You can barely muster ships for one small battle. You can't win this war because you're not even fighting it. If we-the Jedi and Imperial Knights- *do* get the Force back, we can help you in ways you desperately need. That's worth at least a few ships."

Anj considered. "You say Chalk will send a star destroyer to bust this... Tho Yor thing up. What do you expect us to do? Hold it back indefinitely?"

"You might not have to do it at all. That depends on if we can make contact with the Tho Yor, if we can get it to move or defend itself."

"It can do those things?"

Jao looked uncertain. "I think it could. Once."

"Well from what I've heard, it hasn't done much recently except collect seaweed," Anj said. "Listen, we're committed to Selvaris. That's our top priority. But I'll talk to the other leaders about this."

"You can't pull anything away from Selvaris," Saarai said. She told the two Knights, "I'm sorry, but rescuing Stazi has to be our top priority."

"It is," Anj affirmed, "But we may be able to do something for Bavinyar. We've talked a lot about our shortage of ships and what to do in an emergency. If we really need it, we have

funds put aside for use on mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries?” Saaraï and Jao said it together, neither pleased.

“I’m sorry, but it might be the best we can do,” said Anj. “Right now, you three sit tight. If you can keep a line open with Monia, good. We’ll do what we can here. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more”

Reluctantly, they signed off. Val and Jao became sullen with the thought that their precious Tho Yor would be overwhelmed, and with it chance to recover the Force. Saaraï was terrified that it wouldn’t. Lost in their separate doubts, they fell back to restless waiting for the next burst of news. Whatever it was, wherever it came from, it was all out of their hands.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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Strapped tight to the wall of the escape pod, Kyra found herself wishing, quite desperately, that she had a better view. The pod's cylindrical passenger section was a mere three meters in diameter, enough for ten beings to cram into the circular couch shoulder-to-shoulder. Dead ahead of her was a Corellian sharpshooter named Nellis, who hadn't been good-looking even before receiving the burn scar that colored the right side of his jaw and twisted his lip in a permanent sneer. From her angle she could barely even see Karraschakkuk; the big Wookiee was two seats over and the snout of a Bothan named Gresk blocked most of his bulk.

When Kyra tilted her gaze back- hard to do with the headrest directly behind her- she could peek through the escape pod's porthole window and see the blur of hyperspace.

The pod was still attached to its ship, or more accurately to the unpiloted drone that carried them through hyperspace. The second pod was locked snug in its berth right next to theirs, and when she reached out with the Force Kyra could faintly sense Ganner and Asaak as anxious as her.

They'd gone over the plan for insertion into Selvaris in detail, but nobody was totally confident in it. The reconnaissance ships they'd inserted over the planet had reported no orbital defenses and only one satellite hanging in geosynchronous orbit directly above the prison complex on the southern hemisphere. The satellite would surely detect an incoming starship, which was why they'd devised this nerve-wracking entry.

The drone that carried them through hyperspace was programmed to drop to sublight speed beyond Selvaris orbit. From there inertia would carry it into the atmosphere on a preprogrammed vector that would take them roughly above the prison complex. At that point the drone would explode, simulating a mere asteroid burning up in atmosphere, having ejected both pods seconds beforehand. If all went according to plan, the pods would fall to the surface and land undetected within fifty kilometers of the prison, at which point Kyra and the others would initiate a long march through Selvaris' jungles to the site.

It wasn't easily said and it would be even harder to do. Yet when the pod jerked out of hyperspace and stars winked through the porthole window, Kyra felt everyone tense with anticipation. They'd all agreed to this mission knowing full well what might happen to them. They'd been strapped in these crash seats for hours and were ready to get the job started.

Kyra was as restless as them, but she knew landing would be the easy part. The Federation had built a maximum-security jail on Selvaris specifically because it was so inhospitable. A hundred-some years ago the Yuuzhan Vong had occupied the world and used it, appropriately enough, as a prison camp. They'd initiated their terraforming projects, only to abandon the planet with the project half-done, leaving the local and invasive ecosystems to battle it out on their own terms. When the Jedi had put together the Ossus Project they hadn't bothered to try and fix Selvaris. The world was, simply, irrelevant.

It would become a lot more relevant if they could free Stazi. Saara had passed them schematics of the prison, which would help a lot, but first they had to reach it. The jungle trek sounded like the most perilous part, and the pod's undercarriage contained a full supply of wilderness survival gear. Ganner and Asaak's pod, meanwhile, contained weapons and the portable communications device they'd need to call for extraction.

But first things first. Kyra strained her neck back and watched the porthole. After long minutes of drifting through space she finally spotted Selvaris' green disc slip into view.

Nellis, who'd been looking for the same thing, gave a whistle and muttered, "Heads up, boys and girls. We're almost here."

Kyra tensed and waited as they continued the approach to



Selvaris. The carrying drone had been programmed to skirt the edge of the planet's orbit and then fall in, like a meteorite pulled off-course by gravity. The planet slipped out of sight but Kyra knew they were getting closer.

The collective tension was thick in the Force. A thick-bodied, dark-completed human woman named Alasett grunted, "Want to place bets on who lands closer to the prison?"

"You know it'll be us," Gresk said with mock bravado.

"I don't know," said Selos, the furry Jenet on Kyra's left. "Some of the boys on the other pod have crazy luck."

"I wouldn't mind landing further, actually," said Nellis. "No fun waiting around for the others to catch up."

"There aren't woods you wanna trek through," said Alasett.

"I'm not scared of some Vong plants. Are you?"

The woman scoffed. "I ain't scared of nothing."

"That's the spirit." Nellis' lips peeled for a toothy smile.

It was all nervous chatter. Kyra was officially the leader of this mission but she let them talk. Some of these people probably wouldn't make it out of the job alive. Kyra just hoped that they got killed by the enemy, not by the planet itself. They deserved that dignity at least.

The pod's inertial dampened strained as the drone began falling in toward the planet. As Kyra's stomach surged against her chest, Nellis muttered, "Here we go."

She looked back through the porthole and saw it filled with Selvaris' green. The pod began to tremble and so did the view. When she focused on the narrow band of vision she made out not just jungle, but the blue speck of lakes and broad streaks of clouds. They looked dark with rain. She hoped they wouldn't have to land in a storm, but rough weather might help camouflage their landing from the observation satellite above.

The drone was set to drop them and blow and second now. Kyra's heart beat faster and she squeezed the straps of her restraints hard. Everyone else tensed too, waiting, praying they wouldn't get pointlessly blown up by their own ride. Each second lasted forever.

Alasett whispered, "Where the hell is it?"

And then they dropped. The whole pod rattled violently. Even in her restraints, Kyra's shoulders jostled painfully against Gresk's and Selos' and she couldn't knock her head back to

look through the porthole. She could only fall.

She tried to reach out with the Force. Squeezing her eyes tight, blacking out Nellis' ugly mug, she felt the lives packed around her. She felt Ganner and Asaak in the other pod, falling farther away from theirs by the second but seemingly undamaged. And when she reached further she felt the forest itself. Whereas the sentients beside her could be felt as individual minds, the jungle was just a broad swell of existence, every inch containing life and death and regeneration. It was a dizzying thing, all the more because it was coming at them so fast, like it might swallow them whole.

Kyra's eyes burst open at the sound of alarms. Somebody swore; she couldn't tell who. As the pod kept rattling, she shouted, "Neiro! Report!"

The stocky Skrilling commando was seated closest to the pod control panel. Twisting to check the readout, he said, "Landing jet B's gone out."

"Jet B?"

"Bottom-port side," he confirmed.

Kyra felt fear boiling out of everyone, even Karrashchakkuk. Escape pods like this were programmed to compensate if one of the four direction jets malfunctioned, but there was nothing comforting in those alarms.

She knew what she had to do. She pushed the alarms away, and the boiling panic too. She focused on the pod itself. Bottom port. Jet B. It would be the one beneath Assett's seat. Pumping smooth regular breaths through her body, Kyra cleared her mind, called on the Force, and took control. When the other three landing jets fired the whole pod jerked. Kyra grabbed jet B and pushed it hard, imitating the expulsion of jets from the other three jets. The pod, off-balance and starting to spin, righted itself.

She felt it fall further, and the jungle grow closer. It was almost on them. She expanded her awareness to grasp hold of the entire pod and wrapped the whole cylinder in an invisible embrace she pulled it skyward, slowing its fall.

Then they crashed into the treetops. Everything shook too hard to concentrate. She held on to her restraints and was jostled around like everyone else, but the violence of landing lasted only ten seconds. Then, suddenly, they stopped.

The warning alarm stopped wailing. Lights shuddered on. A single pleasant chime sounded, marking successful landing.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Gresk observed, "It seems we're not dead."

A few laughed with released tension. Kyra said, "Okay, people, let's start deployment. First ones out, be careful."

That meant Selos and Alasett. The Jenet smacked the controls for the door and it hissed open. Warm damp air rushed the cabin; it smelled like scorched foliage, and which meant the falling pod had burned a hot streak through the jungle on the way down.

Everyone unstrapped from the crash seats and filed out of the pod in order. Once she got outside Kyra saw what she'd expected: a capsule half-lodged in muddy earth, and a line of black devastation trailing behind them. Thankfully the pod had landed as-planned, with the cargo section facing skyward, and team members clambered over the still-hot metal hull, opened it up, and began removing gear.

Karrash trilled something about the sky and Kyra looked up. There were indeed clouds overhead, thick, tinted faintly violet. The air smelled like rain but the surrounding plant-leaves were dry. She hoped good weather held.

As he slung his pack over his back, Nellis eyes Kyra cautiously. He asked, "Were you the one who righted our landing, ma'am?"

It felt strange being called ma'am by a guy twice her age. "I helped," she said.

"Well I am sure as hells glad you're on our side," he said, then went to check on the cargo.

Karrash added, in a soft moan, they were all glad to have her. Kyra flushed at the compliment, but she appreciated it too. There was no point in having these Force powers if she couldn't be useful. She'd protected the team thus far as only she could; right now she felt confident she could continue to.

Next they had to meet up with Ganner's team. She hoped their landing had been smoother.

Their pod had landed in a deluge. As soon as Asaak opened the hatch, muddy earth poured inside and rainwater spilled into Ganner's face, quickly soaking his shirt. He shouted at Asaak

until the Togruta managed to close the hatch most of the way, though enough mud had clogged the hatch's frame to prevent a full seal.

"Well, this is lovely," spat Cev'mor from his spot next to Asaak. "I'm glad we're getting off to a great start."

Ganner didn't begrudge the foul mood. The Ishi Tib had barely escaped the Praxal VII mission with his life. He'd been brave to volunteer for the follow-up and deserved a smoother job.

"Well, look at it this way," said Asaak, "Their satellite definitely didn't see our landing. Consider this a successful infiltration."

"It'll be successful if our equipment doesn't get soaked," grouched Lazaar, the young human in charge of the communications array.

"What do we do now?" Cev'mor asked Ganner.

As leader of the team, it was his call. Compared to other decisions he might have to make, this one was simple. "We wait out the storm," he told them. "And then we figure out where the hell we are."

Nobody objected. They listened to rain pound the hatch for another ten minutes before it receded to a drizzle. Then they ventured outside. The pod had come in to land next to the base of a large tree whose roots prevented it from sinking into the mud, but the earth around them was still a mess and within a minute outside, Ganner's legs were entirely coated in mud. Several team members helped Lazaar remove the transmitter and affix it to the man's backpack, while Cev'mor and a few others took out the weapons cases.

As for Ganner and Asaak, they tried to get the locator working. Because there were no friendly satellites to ping for telemetry, they would have to find their location on maps recorded by the recon drone flights several days ago. They'd have to explore the terrain first to do that but the ground wasn't even solid right now. So instead he took out a simple compass and checked the readings. If they'd landed anyplace near where they were supposed to land, the prison complex was under fifty kilometers south-south west.

That gave them a direction to start in. So did the tracker Asaak took out. It was the size and shape of a normal datapad,

but he pulled out an antenna that sent out a transmission burst and waited for a reply from Kyra's group.

Ganner waited and felt tense as no reply came. There was no telling whether the other team had landed successfully. Their audio transmitters had very limited range to avoid detection and the Force, of course, no longer worked. Not for him and Asaak.

He distracted himself by giving orders to the others, though they knew perfectly well on their own how to strip all equipment from the pod and prepare the trek through the jungle. Some of the most rugged veterans in the resistance had joined this mission. A few had served with Stazi for all of his seven-year solo war against Krayt, and they were palpably eager to rescue their old leader.

Ganner just wanted a victory.

He got a small one when Asaak's tracker pinged. He looked up from his datapad, grinned, and said, "It's them. North-west-west, looks like twenty-five to thirty kilometers."

The pods were supposed to have landed closer, and the audio transmitters would only work within a ten-kilometer radius. But at least everyone was alive, and as Asaak had said, they'd surely landed undetected thanks to this storm.

The plan had been to rendezvous first, then head for the prison. There was no reason that didn't still hold. It would be a long trek, but that would give them plenty of time to chart the terrain and sync with the recon drones' maps.

Within minutes, the clouds started breaking. Golden light lit up the thick air and started drying the mud. Falling into one single-file line, they began their long journey through the jungle.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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When the report from his operatives on Bavinyar came back, Hogrum Chalk received it with restrained pride. He admitted that he'd made mistakes along the way, but in managing the Federation's intelligence and security services he'd cultivated the best and most efficient operatives. Thus, while he'd given Monia Gahan and the Resettlement Commission a full day to provide their data on the contested area, the report from his spies came back after fifteen standard hours.

When he actually looked at the report, Hogrum was stunned beyond words.

The spies he'd set to work on Bavinyar had no idea what they were looking at. Their notes merely commented on the unusually regular geometry of the object discovered on the ocean floor. The images and topographic data- apparently obtained by bribing a member of the Resettlement Authority- painted a picture of undeniable clarity. When Hogrum saw the close-up of an ancient, eight-spoked Dai Bendu wheel carved into the pyramid slope, his heart skipped a full beat.

He sprung up from his chair, repulsed by the sight of it. As panic filled him, Hogrum paced tight circles in his office as he tried to assemble his thoughts. There was a Tho Yor on Bavinyar, of all the worlds. He didn't bother to ask *how* or *why*; it was a simple fact to deal with. That the Resettlement Authority had blocked off the area meant somebody there knew what it was, and that meant Force-users were on the way.

They were small in number. Hogrum counted them off in his head. There was Eli himself, inbound from Milagro. He'd have to be contacted immediately and told to go to Bavinyar. There

was his foe and counterpart Kyra. There was that strange band of Force-sensitive Yuuzhan Vong, with whom Marasiah had apparently jointed. There was Cade Skywalker, and there was Marin Fel.

Any one of them could be wreak disaster. Things were spiraling out of control; Hogrum felt like he was tipping over a void, and if he fell it would be the destruction of everything he'd labored to create. He felt vertigo; there seemed no escaping the chaos to come.

He struggled to calm himself. There were always steps he could take. Bavinyar had to interdicted. The Tho Yor had to be destroyed. He could send any ship to blast the thing from orbit; even Eli's frigate could do it. But the political repercussions would be disastrous. The senate would demand an explanation why a Federation ship had fired on a Federation world. Dac's refugees and the local Bavinyari would unite to excoriate him; they might even try to stop his ships before they got a chance to fire. The Bavinyari had just a small defense force, but the irascible humans would try to stop Eli if he intervened with *Silencer*.

Which meant they'd need more than a single frigate. They'd bring more and Hogrum would have to be there, to own his actions and to see with his own eyes when the Tho Yor was destroyed. Some things a man simply had to do himself.

Once he formulated a plan, Hogrum hurried over to his desk and turned on the comm. An infuriating seventy seconds later, the holo-image of Rulf Yage appeared. The admiral executed a quick salute, then clasped hands behind his back, expectant.

"Admiral Yage, I have need of your fleet," Hogrum said. "You will prepare a special task force with the aim of interdicting the planet Bavinyar."

The admiral had a good sabacc face, but he couldn't conceal shock. "Bavinyar, sir? Does this have anything to do with the resistance?"

He'd been given an opening, so Hogrum decided to take it. "We've received reports that key rebel personnel are gathered on that world. We will spare no effort in seizing them. You, admiral, will personally lead that force."

"As you command, sir."

"Familiarize yourself with Bavinyar's local defense fleet.

You are not going there to fight them, and you should do everything you can to avoid confrontation, but be prepared. The Bavinyari are fiercely protective of their planet.”

“I understand, sir. Do you have specific intelligence on where the rebel leaders are meeting?”

“Not at this time. However, I will join you to personally supervise the siege.”

Yage looked stunned again, but recovered. “Very good, sir. Should I expect to welcome you aboard *War Hammer*?”

“No. I’ll be taking the *Jagged Fel* and meeting you there.”

That was another snap decision. He’d feel most in control aboard the old Imperial flagship. Yage was a good officer, but then, he’d been a good officer for Darth Krayt before switching sides. You could never trust a man who’d turned traitor, even when he’d done it in your favor. Hogrum would have rather called on Eduoard Fenel but the admiral was currently at Yaga Minor, a week away from Bavinyar at best speed.

“I understand the importance of this, sir,” said Yage. “I’d like to be prepared as best I can.”

“I’ll draft a report and send you all you need to know before you reach Bavinyar. Prepare a force that is small but capable. Use your best captains.”

Yage clearly wanted more to go on before he launched an expedition, but like a good soldier he nodded, “Yes, sir. Absolutely.”

“Good. Contact me before you set out. I’ll be aboard the *Jagged Fel* by then.”

“Understood, sir.”

Yage snapped another salute. Hogrum turned the holo off before he let it go. He stared at his desk, trying to figure out the next course of action. Contacting Eli was the most immediate, and he quickly patched in a call to the young man’s frigate.

He appeared before Hogrum still looking ashamed. As well he should; he’d come so close to seizing Marasiah, then let her fall through his fingers. Hogrum explained the situation quickly and concisely, and watched shame turn to shock and then to determination on Eli’s face.

“I’ll do whatever I can to keep the Tho Yor from being activated,” he said, “But realistically, sir, our enemies have a head start.”



"I know. I'm sending Yage there with a task force. I'll bring the *Jagged Fel* also. You're closer than either of us, which means you'll get there first, but do *not* approach Bavinyar. In fact, don't go closer than the system edge without telling me."

Eli frowned. "Why is that, sir?"

"Because if an Imperial frigate appears and starts firing on their planet, the Bavinyari- the humans *and* the refugees- will be furious. They might even fire on you with *their* ships, which aren't much, but together they could take *Silencer*. Until Yage and I arrive you're to stand back, wait, and observe every ship going in and out of Bavinyar."

"And if I see Skywalker's *Mynock*, or Khat Lah's ship?"

Hogrum's scarred lips pressed to a scowl. "If you are certain you can engage and skill, launch fighters, and intercept."

"Yes, sir. I understand." Eli looked ashamed, but even if he hadn't botched the Milagro mission Hogrum would have given the same order. The politics of the situation were just too tense.

The young man asked, "May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Go ahead."

"I highly recommend you bring Ania Solo with you on the *Jagged Fel*. Given the people we're likely to find on Bavinyar, she could be an excellent negotiating tool."

In his panic Hogrum had forgotten about the Solo woman, but Eli was right. she would be excellent leverage against her mother and cousins, as long as she was truly unable to use to the Force. Though she'd shown no signs of it and was currently under captivity without ysalamiri nearby, he'd never allow himself to relax around any scion of Skywalker.

With a few parting words Hogrum closed the link to Eli. He allowed himself to breath. The situation could still spin wildly out of control at any minute, but he was giving shape back to chaos. He might even turn defeat into victory, so long as the Force was not with him.

After another period of long waiting came another barrage of news. It was early morning in Galactic City when the safe-house's comm system started chiming. Jao, who'd been too restless to sleep, quickly pounced on it and turned it on. Yalta Val and Saarai, both bleary-eyed, came in behind him to watch as Monia Gahan's holo-image appeared.

"Thanks for calling, Senator," said Jao. "What's going on?"

"Word's just come down," the Mon Cal said. "Hogrum Chalk has left Coruscant."

Jao's heart tumbled. "For Bavinyar?"

"It's unclear. There's reports his shuttle is heading for the *Jagged Fel*." The longtime flagship of multiple Fel monarchs had mostly been on maneuvers around the Coruscant system since the end of the war with Krayt.

From over his shoulder, Val asked, "What about the report you gave him?"

"I haven't given any report because I haven't *gotten* one from the Resettlement Authority." Monia's voice shook with stress. "Chalk just left, with no explanation! Everyone's confused."

"Do you think it has to do with Stazi?" asked Saarai.

The Mon Cal shook her head. "It might, I just don't know."

"If Chalk is baiting *another* trap, he wouldn't need to go himself," said Val. "General Jaeger is manning the 'yards at Bilbringi. He's more than capable of handling whatever the rebels can throw at Selvaris... no offense."

"None taken. You're just being realistic," sighed Saarai. "There must be some way to find out where Chalk has gone. Master Val, you still have contacts in the Knights."

"I'm not sure who I can trust anymore," he admitted, "And it may not even matter. As you've pointed out, Chalk keeps us at a distance. He probably didn't even take any Knights with him to the *Jagged Fel*."

Jao threw up his hands in frustration. "So what happens now? We just sit around and wait?"

"We may not have to," said Monia. "There's something *else* that's come in. It hasn't reached official channels yet, but the Resettlement Authority on Bavinyar commed me to say that a task force of six mercenary ships has shown up over the planet."

So Anj had come through after all. Saarai looked deflated, but Jao felt a surge of joy. Small help was far better than no help. "They're there to protect the Tho Yor," he told Monia.

"Well, right now they're in a standoff with the Bavinyar Defense Force. They *say* they've been hired to protect and asset on that world, but the BDF doesn't trust strangers."

"But there's been no fighting yet?"

“No. Right now it’s tense, but quiet.”

“What kind of mercenaries are they?” asked Val. “Mandalorians?”

“I don’t think so. The reports would have mentioned that. It said they have two frigates, a carrier, and three corvettes. That’s not enough to hold back a Federation fleet, or even the *Jagged Fel*.”

“Combined with the BDF it might be worth something,” said Val.

“That’s not a combination you’re likely to see,” Monia said. “The BDF does *not* trust strangers... Though it might have to.”

“So what happens now?” asked Jao. “What are *you* doing?”

He knew he was pushing, maybe too hard, but Monia lifted her barbed chin. “*That’s* the main reason I’m calling you. In light of the situation on Bavinyar, and the critical role Dac’s refugees are playing in this, I’ve decided to go to the planet myself to help resolve the crisis.”

She said it with the firm confidence of a stateswoman, but Jao knew how dangerous that was. She was likely on a collision course with Hogrum Chalk, the *Jagged Fel*, and whatever else the regent brought with him. But she was going anyway.

Saarai smiled tightly. “I’m proud of you, Monia. There’s still a Rogue in you after all.”

“Maybe,” the senator said seriously, “But I have a responsibility to protect my people on Bavinyar.”

“Protect that Tho Yor and protect us all,” Jao assured.

He’d learned enough about Mon Cal expressions to tell she looked uncertain. Monia said, “I have an MC-28 transport I use for ambassadorial missions. There’s space for around twenty passengers, plus standard crew. In other words, there’s more than room for you.”

“Are you sure that’s safe?” asked Saarai.

“If you use that disguise you first met me in, I think I can pass you off as an advisor. Masters Assam and Val could stand in as bodyguards, assuming we don’t get anywhere near Chalk himself. If we do, you lock yourselves on the ship and stay well-clear. Do you understand?”

Jao’s heart leaped, then fell. He yearned to be there at Bavinyar for whatever happened, but he also needed to rescue Ania. Yalta Val, perceptive as always, put a hand on his

shoulder. "Jao, there's no telling where she is right now. She might not even be on Coruscant. We can't do anything for her here. But at Bavinyar, just possibly, we could be of use." He smirked tiredly. "And it would get us out of this damned safehouse."

"You told me you had a speeder bike," said Monia. "I can give you a location to rendezvous with one of my aides. She can provide you with disguises, and then take you to my ship. If you're still willing."

Jao swallowed. It was a hard choice, but Master Val was right. "I'm willing," he said. "Anything's better than staying locked up here."

Their eyes drifted to Saarai. The Chagrian was staring at the floor, into something Jao couldn't guess. Face clenched tight, she lifted her head and told Monia, "All right, I'm with you. Whatever happens at Bavinyar, I want to be there to see it."

Marin emerged to consciousness with an inescapable sense of longing. The light of the ceiling placement overhead seemed to draw her out of the fugue state, but she left it only reluctantly. She felt like she was snared by a hook and dragged out of the sea, but that sea had been knowledge, and though its current had been fierce she'd done her best to swim in it.

Now all that was falling away. Planets on planets, stars on stars, millennia on millennia had felt so close she could touch them. Now they fell away and so did her hope of understanding the Force, the centerpiece of her life.

When she found herself fully above the surface, lying on her back in what she realized was the sickbay of her daughter's ship, Marin was left with only a few clear impressions of what she'd been through inside the Tho Yor. She remembered speaking to the ancient Je'daii soul that had been inside. She'd begged for help, and Tasha Ryo had insisted she could not give it, though in that insistence Marin had sensed a reluctance, perhaps even a fear. Rather than explain, Tasha had ejected Marin back into space and time.

Marin continued to stare at the ceiling, thinking. She only moved after hearing a familiar tinny voice say, "It appears the patient has regained normal awareness. Please report to sick bay immediately."

With effort she put hands on the table, pushed herself to sit upright, and removed the IV drip they'd stuck in her right arm. AG-37 towered silently before her, watching with glowing vertically-stacked photoreceptors. It was not a pretty face, but it was welcome nonetheless.

She gave the assassin droid a weary smile. "As you can see, I survived."

"And I am quite pleased with the fact," the mechanical monotone said. "Sauk will be here shortly, as will several Jedi."

"Some of them got here? Good. What about Khat Lah or Skywalker?"

"If they've arrived, I'm not aware. Do you require any assistance?"

"A glass of water would be nice."

"I can provide one easily."

AG-37 stomped away. He returned just in time to be joined by a flock of Jedi. The little sick bay felt suddenly crowded by the massive, furry bodies of the Cathar Rasi Tuum and the Whiphid K'Kruhk. Marin and Azlyn Rae seemed puny in comparison.

In between mouthfuls of water, Marin explained as best she could what she'd encountered inside the Tho Yor. She described the assault of so much knowledge, the sense of removal from space and time, and the half-ascended consciousness she'd encountered there. She watched their expressions wilt as she described Tasha's refusal to help.

"I felt like that wasn't all of it," she told the Jedi. "It wasn't that Tasha didn't want to help... I felt like she *did*, and maybe even know a way how, but she was... reluctant."

"Reluctant for *what*?" Azlyn sounded disbelieving.

"I don't know. It was hard just to stay focused on her words. What they meant..." Marin shook her head. "I can't say."

Rasi Tuum growled, "Did you explain to the Tho Yor that it might be in terrible danger?"

"I did. She sensed my urgency... But I gather it hasn't budged."

"It is still unmoved on the ocean floor," said AG-37. "The Resettlement Authority has cordoned off the ocean around it with an exclusion zone, which has not escaped notice of the Bavinyari government, or the Federation."

No surprise there. She tried to shake off the memory of infinity and focus on the here-and-now. "What kind of threat are we dealing with?"

"Uncertain," said K'Kruhk, "But we've been told Chalk has left Coruscant suddenly. Maybe to come here, maybe on other business."

"Ah, stang," she breathed. "And nothing from Khat Lah or Skywalker?" They might get more out of Tasha Ryo than her.

"I believe they are en route," said K'Kruhk, "But we do not know who will arrive first."

The smallness of her mortal self oppressed Marin. Inside the Tho Yor it had felt like she could know anything and *do* anything. She'd felt closer to the core of the Force than ever. Now she was just one old woman, about to be overwhelmed by events past her control.

"There's some good news," Azlyn offered. "We contacted the resistance and asked them to send help. They're apparently committed to a big operation elsewhere, but they hired a batch of mercenaries to help guard the Tho Yor."

"Mercenaries? You mean Mandos?"

"No," said Rasi Tuum. "I doubt the rebels could afford what Thorum Rhal is charging for services nowadays. Another company, called Black Spear."

That wasn't familiar, but Marin had stopped following the guns-for-hire business. "Are they here now?"

"Yes," said AG-37. "They have six ships, which are currently sharing orbit with the BDF, uncomfortably but peacefully. The unit commander has come down to this settlement asking to liaise with our leader."

They all stared at her, and Marin realized what they meant. She wanted to tell K'Kruhk to take charge of this operation, but while the Master was ancient and venerable, he could not touch the Force or communicate with the Tho Yor. Only one person here could do that. She was the sole indispensable person on Bavinyar.

"Oh, hell," she sighed. "I guess I might as well talk to him."

"Her," corrected Azlyn. "Are you sure you're fit for it?"

"Just give me a few minutes. And a fresh set of clothes." Marin swallowed another mouthful of water. "Then I'll be good to go."

Once she changed out of the sweat-stained suit she'd worn into the Tho Yor, Marin left *Free Agent* with AG-37 and the three Jedi as company. Ania's freighter was one of many docked among the four-square-kilometer sprawl of interconnected floating platforms that made up their refugee settlement. Beneath the platforms, submerged into the ocean, was a vast tangle of connected chambers and tubes housing some seventy thousand refugees from Dac, a near-equal mix of Mon Cal and Quarren. Though she'd not visited them, Marin understood the submerged sections were cobbled-together, cramped, and unlovely; frankly what you'd expect from a refugee camp. The topside wasn't much better.

As she was led through the maze of platforms, Marin reached out with the Force and became acutely aware of all the sentient life humming beneath her, most of it totally unaware of the crisis that was about to be upon them. From what she'd heard, Hogrum Chalk wouldn't hesitate to sink the entire settlement if he thought it necessary. The lives of innocents hung on her actions. One hasty choice or misstep could doom them, and the only thing she had to guard against total disaster was mercurial advice from the Force.

It almost felt like being a Jedi again. She was starting to remember why she'd quit the first time.

Most of the ships docked on the platforms were tramp freighters and rugged haulers. Marin was, therefore, able to recognize the mercenaries' ship right away. The old Kuati patrol craft had been modified and armed to the teeth. She counted five heavy turrets and at least two projectile tubes on the broad, angular ship.

As Marin's group approached, she spotted a cluster of beings standing beneath its nose. Most were clothed in plasteel plates colored black, with a few precise slashes of gold on the shoulders and one gilded stripe across the breast. They wore no helmets, and while they clearly weren't Mandalorians she nonetheless recalled that black was the Mando color for justice, gold for revenge. Something tensed inside her.

As she drew near Sauk, who'd been standing with the group, disengaged. The Mon Cal hurried over to her and said, "I'm so glad you're all right, Marin."

He didn't sound glad at all. "Is something wrong?"

"It's... Well..." Sauk shifted anxiously on his feet. "You should find out for yourself."

Curious and cautious, Marin let Sauk take her to the mercenary ship. Only one from the group turned to approach her. She was the shortest of the lot, a human with dark-brown hair cut to a severe bob. She was young, probably around Ania's age. When her eyes lit on Marin she stopped dead in her tracks and one hand brushed the blaster at her hip.

Marin froze too, and if she'd had a weapon she'd have reached for it. Instead she stared at Sora Auchs for a long moment before asking, "Are you the leader here?"

Palm on the butt of her weapon, Sora said, "I'm chief of operations on this mission."

Marin swallowed and tried not to look at the blaster. "You're being paid to protect something of ours. Will you do that?"

Sora's eyes narrowed. In the Force she emanated shock, confusion, and suspicion. Marin probably gave out the same. A long time ago, nearly fifty years back, Marin had killed Sora's grandfather. She'd become a nemesis to her father Yaga, just as Yaga had been hers, and though they'd struck an alliance to take down Darth Nihl, Yaga had died shortly thereafter, killed by his own lieutenants after Marin's nephew Liem had provided them proof that their *Mand'alor* had betrayed and murdered his predecessor, Chernan Ordo. They said Sora had been there and seen Yaga's execution with her own eyes.

Marin had thought that long, tangled, unhappy era of her life was behind her. But she should have known the past was never truly past. Sora Auchs was here in front of her now, and somehow she had to deal with that. The fate of the Force might depend on it.

She risked a step closer and lowered her voice. "I'm not responsible for your father's death. I didn't even want it. You probably think that's *osik* but it's true."

Sora stared. Behind her, the other mercenaries had noticed what was happening and were slowly drawing weapons.

"Perhaps," suggested AG-37, "We should all agree to disarm before furthering negotiations."

Marin could tell Sora wouldn't go for that. She pressed, "I'm sorry for what happened to your father. And what happened to you. I had no idea Liem gave Thorum Rhal that recording."



After her father had been branded traitor, Sora had run. She'd become *dar'manda* and struck out on her own. Probably she'd worked as hired muscle or as a bounty hunter for a little while before joining a non-Mando mercenary group and, with the skill and ferocity expected of a *Mand'alor's* daughter, climbed the ranks. Marin didn't need to be told any of that. She could see it in the younger woman's eyes and feel it in the Force.

The question was whether Sora would elect to continue the decades-long, often-fatal feud between the Auchs family and Marin's own Skirata clan. It went all the way back to Marin's mother and Sora's great-uncle but Marin had naively thought the story completed.

Whether it was or not was in Sora's hands.

Very slowly, the younger woman let her gun hand fall to her side, still close to the blaster but not on it. She asked, "Where's your nephew now?"

"I haven't seen Liem for years. After what he pulled, I told him I'm not working with him anymore." It was the truth. She emphasized it with the Force but doubted it would help. Sora was surely still Mando at heart, stubborn and hard to sway.

"This mission we were hired for," said Sora, "What does it have to do with you?"

"It's a very long story. Most of it's not relevant."

"Does it have to do with you being a Jedi?"

"It does, but most of that doesn't concern you. All we want from your people is the defense of one target on the ocean floor. That's all."

Sora tilted eyes skyward. "You're expecting an attack from above?"

"Yes. Probably Federation."

"This planet *is* Federation."

"The situation's complicated. I can explain all that... if you're still willing to fight."

Many mercenaries would take that as an insulting insinuation of cowardice. A good Mando certainly would. Sora didn't look offended, only skeptical. Finally she said, "I asked for the boss on the ground. Is that you?"

Marin glanced back at the Jedi Masters, who remained silent. "I guess it is."

Sora's eyes were only on her, and she could feel the woman's

personal feelings war with professional pride. But she moved her hand fully away from the weapon, clasped it at her back, and said, "Black Spear Company is at your service. Now, you'd better explain to me what exactly we're supposed to protect."

"I'll tell you everything you need," Marin said with relief. She wasn't so stupid or optimistic to think things settled between her and Sora, but for now they'd stood down from confrontation. For now, that was enough.

The Yuuzhan Vong dovin basals flung Khat Lah's flyer through lightspeed with silence and smoothness that felt strange to Marasiah. It was unlike the hyperdrive-propelled rides she'd known and, more, their frictionless leap toward Bavinyar was in stark contrast to her feelings inside.

"Contact has been made with the Tho Yor, but it remains under the ocean," informed Khat Lah after completing a transmission, apparently to Jedi on-site. "A mercenary company has arrived to help protect the site, in case of Federation intervention."

"Mercenaries are fickle," Xahn Carr told those gathered in the flyer's small rear hold, "But they are better than nothing."

Talon, cleaned and poised after the fight on Milagro, asked, "What do you mean contact was made? Has someone entered the Tho Yor?"

"Someone has," Khat Lah nodded. "Not Cade Skywalker. He is, as yet unrarrived."

Talon pressed, "If someone entered the Tho Yor then they spoke with it, yes? If they did, what happened?"

"K'Kruhk was not specific. It's possible that another conversation may be required."

"You mean you."

The Yuuzhan Vong nodded. "I mean me. I have done it before, on Tython. The mind inside the Tho Yor may yield more to me."

"In the meantime," said Xahn Carr, "We must be prepared for any battle."

"Indeed." Khat Lah shifted his gaze to Marasiah. The empress, also cleaned and changed, sat on a bench along the wall, listening but not speaking. "It is possible your uncle may appear himself."

Marasiah was skeptical. "My uncle tugs his puppets' strings. He doesn't touch things directly."

"For something this important he might," said Talon.

Marasiah snorted. The Twi'lek was as stoic-seeming as ever, but through the Force she leaked desperate desire. She craved reunion with her powers so badly it was pathetic.

"Xahn Carr is right," said Khat Lah. "Come. We must prepare the other warriors for a fight... of any kind."

The two Yuuzhan Vong moved out of the hold, leaving Marasiah and Talon alone. The Twi'lek moved to follow them but stopped, turned, and lingered in the doorway, watching Marasiah.

The ex-empress has no desire to start bickering with Talon again. It had nearly gotten them killed on Milagro. She held her tongue and looked away, but Talon asked, "Do you want your uncle to be there?"

Staring at the floor Marasiah said, "I never want to see him again. Why would I?"

"To kill him, of course."

She said it with simplicity and no judgment. Marasiah glanced up without raising her head. "Do you approve?"

"I don't disapprove."

"But?"

Talon tilted her head thoughtfully. "You are not the woman I expected."

The words brought Marasiah to her feet. She glared at Talon from across the room. "You should leave now."

"I'm sure you want to kill me as well," said Talon, so dispassionately. "You have a reason. I killed your teacher all those years ago, and many more of your father's Knights."

"If you want to die-"

"I don't," said Talon, very softly. "And I don't think you want to kill me."

Marasiah took deep breaths to restrain herself, like Elke Vetter had taught her. She told Elke's killer, "On Milagro you accused me of sulking. Crying. Hiding in grief when I had the Force and could do anything I wanted."

Talon stared, motionless, in silent affirmation.

"You don't understand. You Sith, you think all power is there to be abused. If I faced my uncle, knowing all he's done, I

would strike him down. I'd burn him away. I would use every spark of darkness inside me."

"Like you did on Milagro."

"Milagro was just a taste," she whispered.

Marasiah could barely remember the fight atop the outcropping. All she knew was that, surrounded by enemies and desperate, she'd given herself entirely to her anger and hate, and in doing so had rendered matter with a storm of Force energy. She'd never done anything like that before but it had felt so easy and natural, and it had felt impossible to stop. She'd drawn on the dark side before, but never gone so fully over, not like that. And when she thought of her uncle she knew she could do it again.

"You are afraid of your power," said Talon.

"I should be. You're afraid of it, I can tell."

Talon said nothing, another wordless agreement.

"I didn't hide on Milagro all those years because I'm a coward," Marasiah said. "It's not because I'm afraid of the dark. I am a *Fel*. I was taught from the day I was born to protect peace and order in this galaxy. Look around now and what do you see? Peace and order. My uncle's built it on blood and lies but he's *built* it."

"And you'd let it stand like this?" For the first time Talon sounded surprised.

"That may sound like an excuse for cowardice but it's not. My uncle's stabilized the Federation like I never could. Topple or kill him and anarchy could be unleashed again. I won't have that. Whatever else I am, I'm still a *Fel*. I won't destroy peace and order."

Talon narrow her eyes, weighing Marasiah's words for truth. Eventually she said, "All this time I have been with Khat Lah, he has been trying to get me to discover who I am without the Force. He views it as a process of self-discovery."

Marasiah found it hard to care about a Sith's problems. "How valiant of him."

"You have not lost the Force, but you've lost your throne and I see that's harmed you just as deeply."

"Don't pretend to understand me."

"I neither pretend nor understand. My point is that, before coming to your rescue, I spoke with someone who told me I

had no self to discover. He told me I was an empty vessel, and I meant nothing until I was filled with a purpose from the outside. And he said that even if I couldn't feel the Force, it could still fill me."

"And how is that supposed to solve my problem?"

"It isn't. But it may help solve mine. I've been thinking on it a great deal lately." Finally Talon turned for the exit, but tilted her head back for parting words. "Perhaps you should think on it too, before we reach Bavinyar."

With that she left, leaving Marasiah alone in the end, final words echoing in the flyer's absolute silence.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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Gar Stazi stopped and held position: back and legs straight, arms bent on either side and straining from his own weight, face just inches from the floor. Frozen in the bottom trough of a push-up, he could feel the burn on his biceps, abdomen, and neck. He stayed there for one second, two, three. He almost got to ten before the strain was too much. He let his knees hit the floor first, then his elbows, and finally the tip of his hairless forehead kissed cold tile.

His chest heaved as he labored for breath, then steadied. He pushed himself upright on his knees, stood. His green skin was damp with perspiration and nearly every muscle in his body ached from the series of push-ups, lunges, crunches, planks, and windmills he'd put himself through. With the ache came adrenaline, and he smiled in the isolation of his cell.

That meeting with Zegorian had lit a fire inside Stazi. Just seeing the face of his enemy after so long in isolation filled with him angry energy. For the first few days he'd felt like punching the walls, but now he'd shunted that restlessness into his new regimen. He'd kept in peak shape during his soldier days, then gone soft during his time as triumvir. Prison had softened him more, and age was finally catching up with his body.

There were only so many exercises he could do in his little cell, but he was determined to do them all. It was the only way to feel alive anymore.

Having run through all of his repetitions and pushed himself to the limit, Stazi paced back and forth in his cell. He stretched arms slowly, then legs and waist. He felt alive now, but he

knew it wouldn't last. He'd feel the walls crowd in on him soon enough, and the next time a droid slipped his bland meal through the slot at the bottom of the door the full hopelessness of his captivity would hit him.

But right now, while his body happily ached, Stazi felt all right. He could hope. The rebel raid on Praxal VII had been a failure, yes, but it also proved that beings out there were still fighting to free him. They were few, outnumbered and outgunned, but it had been the same with him ten years ago. Zegorian had overplayed his hand and told too much.

In his copious free time, Stazi had also scoured his memories and found the name Zegorian tucked away; he remembered that the general had been part of Roan Fel's army, a man more notable for his loyalty than his tactical skill but a competent administrator who'd managed the Bilbringi shipyards for a year after the war's end. Like many military men of modest talent, he'd made the peacetime transition to the Federal Correctional Authority.

Scouring memory further, Stazi found Zegorian again. The general had commanded a garrison at Ord Trasi during the Sith-Imperial war, one that Stazi himself had successfully raided. So perhaps it all came down to a grudge.

That was fine by Stazi. Passion fueled a man but it also clouded his judgement. He knew both aspects personally. Knowledge was a weapon. He didn't know how to use it, but he kept it in his arsenal for later use. In the meantime he'd continued as he had for the duration of his captivity.

Still waiting, still hoping, day after uncounted day.

There was something fundamentally strange about Selvaris. The planet was like nothing Kyra had experienced before. That was plain to everyone as they made their trek through the jungle, marching toward the rendezvous with Ganner's team, but she felt it unique in the Force.

The forest was dense with life, almost oppressively so, but it was also peppered with gaps. She'd known that the planet's ecosystem contained a chaotic mix of native and Yuuzhan Vong lifeforms, but she hadn't expected them to be so intertwined. They'd push through a clump of tightly-packed trees to get lashed at by gnarled, thorny vines hanging off low

branches. Blades of knifelike senalak stalks would mix with soft native brush. Sometimes Kyra would glance up and see creatures winging in the sky overhead, but she couldn't feel them in the Force. None of this Vonglife registered to her.

Lowbacca had once told her how disarmingly strange it was to encounter life that didn't appear in the Force. She'd never had that experience before; now it put her on edge and made her balance Force abilities with her other senses. She was constantly on alert; the whole terrain felt hostile.

The others seemed to fare better, if only because the jungle merely looked strange for them. Gresk and Selos, a Bothan and Jenet respectively, were the group scouts, and they'd usually range ahead to chart the terrain, steering them clear of concentrated patches of Vonglife. The most invaluable member of the team was Karrashchakkuk; when he encountered trees tall and strong enough, the Wookiee would clamber up the trunk with natural ease and scan the terrain from the highest vantage possible.

After a local day and a half of trekking, they'd been able to match their surroundings with the detailed topographic maps taken by the recon drones. Kyra placed their initial landing spot at sixty kilometers north of the prison complex, outside the ideal range but still workable. Based on their movements and Ganner's, and considering their pace so far, they'd have another two days of travel after the rendezvous.

She couldn't wait for it to end. She could never feel at ease here; it was too patchy in the Force. More than that, it was too damned hot. Even Karrash, who'd been born for jungles, was overheated beneath his furry pelt. Worse than the heat was the humidity. Wetness in the air felt like an additional layer of clothes, and she hadn't stopped sweating since they'd landed. The sky was only rarely clear; more often, thick gray clouds swirled overhead, periodically dispatching bursts of heavy rain. Each torrent usually lasted less than ten minutes, but they'd turn earth to mud and make movement difficult.

Kyra found herself craving solid floors and recycled air. Even a prison seemed appealing.

The bright point was that Ganner's team seemed to be moving steadily toward them. That meant they had no injured slowing them down. Hopefully their equipment was intact too.



Kyra kept her team updated on their progress, with frequent estimates on how soon the two groups could join up. It gave them something immediate and attainable to hope for and kept morale high, despite everything else.

Each team was carrying a portable communicator with a ten-kilometer range, and when the tracking device showed Ganner had entered that zone she patched in a call. Just hearing his voice was encouraging; so was his report that all of his people and equipment were intact. Good news instilled people with new energy, and they began moving faster through the forest. It was late afternoon now, and the jungle was starting to be swallowed by its own shadows. With a little extra push, Kyra thought the two groups could rendezvous before nightfall and set camp together.

Yet they couldn't afford to be hasty. The Yuuzhan Vong bioforms were still dangerous, and some of Selvaris' local flora could be too. In terms of fauna, they'd encountered less than what Kyra had expected. Avians, both native and Vonglife, circled the air. Small reptiles scampered through the brush and leaped from branch to branch, but none of them were threatening. Several times they'd encountered paths worn through the brush by seemingly-large bodies, but Kyra never sensed such creatures nearby, and they'd gotten no indication whether they were herbivores or carnivores. Still, it was one more reason to watch out.

As they got closer to the rendezvous it grew darker and harder to pass. Clouds obscured sundown and a violet gloom settled in the forest. Selos, with his excellent Jenet night-vision, led the way, advising those behind on where to step carefully. Kyra listened to his words but more she listened to the Force. The area around them was dense with native life and barely scarred by the void of Yuuzhan Vong biots. With so many plants, insects, and small animals packed together she had to strain a little to find Ganner and his company approaching, but she did. She felt their tiredness, their determination, their beleaguered hope. They were a perfect mirror to her own group.

And because she could feel them, she knew when they'd arrived. At the last minute Kyra pressed ahead past Selos. At the first sight of bodies moving through the shadows brush ahead she raised an arm and gave a loud, high-pitched whistle.

The approaching bodies stopped; one of them waved and whistled in turn.

After that the two parties met like colliding waves. Sweaty, dirty, tired soldiers embraced without hesitation. There was backslapping and laughter and jokes, joyous relief in the mounting dark. At that moment everyone believed they'd not only make it to the prison but rescue Stazi and all get out alive.

They'd needed that optimism, but Kyra tried to keep a level head. She asked Ganner, "What about all the equipment? I heard you had a wet landing. Is the long-range transmitter okay?"

"Lazaar ran systems checks. It's good. We should be set to beam a call out when the time comes."

"And injuries?"

"Well, Asaak got too close to one of the Vong biots. Whatever was in those thorns gave him nausea but a standard anti-toxin seemed to clear him up."

"That's good." In the darkness she couldn't see Ganner's face, but she could feel he was evaluating her. She added, "I'm good. Thanks for asking."

"Have you gotten any... feelings?"

That was a vague question, but the Force was often vague. "The only feeling I've got is that this is a weird planet. It feels ninety percent there, thick and alive. The over ten percent just isn't. It's confusing."

"Well, we're all here together now. That should help."

"I hope so. I give it about two days from here to the prison." She smiled in the dark. "So far so good, right?"

Against his gloomy self, Ganner smiled back. "So far so good. But let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"I know. Tonight we break camp. We'll deal with tomorrow when it comes."

There was no need to lay out fires when the day's heat clung to the damp night air, but several glowlamps were laid out on the forest floor, providing just enough illumination for the twenty travelers to lay out their bedrolls and sleep on patches of clear, solid ground.

The first night after landing, Ganner and company had been sleeping when the clouds opened up and doused them all

awake. As he lay down this second night he saw speckled stars peeking through black branches. He hoped the clear sky would hold for the duration, though weather changed quickly on Selvaris. He searched patches of starlight to spot the two sentries set for the night's first watch: Lazaar and Selos, the sharp-eyed Jenet from Kyra's team. Feeling comfortable with those two on watch, he allowed himself to lie down and surrender to rejuvenating oblivion.

Sleep came fast and time left him. When it returned it came with motion and noise and the sudden shock of fear; everything but light.

Ganner sat upright in his bedroll and groped for his blaster. Clouds hid the stars and the forest floor was impenetrable black. He heard someone screaming, and another wail that came from no sentient he'd ever met. The right corner of his vision caught the flash of a blaster going off. He turned, pushed to his feet, and ran toward it, rifle in hand.

His eyes could barely make out what lay ahead. A creature, easily three meters high, had burst through the woods. Several humanoid figures stood before it; their blasters went off again, and in the flash Ganner could see the six-legged beast's hideous mouth, overflowing with long teeth like spines, its clawed forward feet, and the Ishi Tib stuck beneath them. A rifle flashed again and he saw Cev'mor, pinned by the monster, flailing in desperation and pain.

Ganner hefted his rifle high to make sure he didn't shoot a comrade, then opened fire. His blaster flared; the bolts smoke against the creature's thick green hide without tearing through. The monster flinched at the annoyance, then tipped its head back and slammed it down. Spines stabbed into Cev'mor's chest. He wailed in agony as the creature lifted him off the ground. Ganner and the others hesitated to shoot, though they knew he was already dead.

Then a white blade hummed to life. Kyra leaped in from the side and thrust her lightsaber into the monster's flank. Now it wailed in a pain, a horrible high-pitched shrieking that stabbed Ganner's skull. Kyra winced for the pain but twisted her burning blade, scorching the creatures' insides.

Then it kicked its nearest leg and pounded Kyra in the stomach. She went flying back, taking her lightsaber with her.

The monster reared and ran, Cev'mor's body still dangling from the spines that had impaled it. Ganner fired at its backside as it ran through the brush, knowing it was useless but refusing to let another death pass quietly.

There was nothing he could do. The creature disappeared into the brush, victim in its maw. A few tried to give chase but there was no point. Even wounded and carrying its prey, the creature was frighteningly fast. They could hear it crash through the forest until that sound receded to nothing.

Ganner threw his rifle to the ground in frustration. Cev'mor had volunteered for this mission after nearly dying at Praxal VII. He'd risked so much so bravely only to die pointlessly before even reaching his objective. It was a sad, stupid, pointless death.

But at least Ganner hadn't had to kill the Ishi Tib himself.

The camp was abuzz with confused chatter. More glowlamps turned on, created patches of illumination. He saw Asaak Dan rushing toward Kyra's prone figure and hurried to join him.

The young woman sat upright with their help. Asaak immediately touched her abdomen, asking, "Does it hurt? You may have cracked a rib."

"I don't know," she winced, clearly in pain.

"Just lie down," Ganner said. "Stay here. Don't move. Asaak, get Wendax!"

"Right," the Togruta said, then dashed to find the team medic.

Ganner looked back to Kyra as she lay in the dirt. She clasped her inactive lightsaber in her right hand, tight.

He took her left hand and said, "You did all you could. That creature was Vonglife. You couldn't have felt it in the Force."

"I know," she creaked. "I was asleep... Didn't see it coming..."

"That's what I mean. It's not your fault. There's nothing you could have done. Nothing."

Kyra didn't speak, didn't nod. She just stared straight up at the forest roof and the black sky beyond. She accepted what he'd said as truth, but that brought her comfort. Instead, the truth of her helplessness wounded her like no failure could.

Ganner didn't need the Force to know that. He could read it all in her eyes.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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From *Silencer*'s bridge Bavinyar was barely a blue speck, but the planet was just light-minutes ahead, near enough for the frigate's long-range sensors to scan activity in its orbit. There was nothing encouraging in what they found. Eli Horn had been hoping that the Jedi, scattered across the galaxy, would be ill-equipped to defend the Tho Yor, but they'd clearly come up with something.

"The two frigates look like refitted Imperial *Kontos*-class ships," Captain Morrabin said as he leaned close to the tactical readout. "Very old, but they could be dangerous. The carrier looks like a SoroSuub, even older, but from this range we can't get a clear read on their armaments." The Givin turned to look at Eli. "Rebels?"

That sort of scrappy force was the kind the resistance might muster, though Eli had never heard of them acquiring twin *Kontos*-class frigates, and he'd been monitoring their fleets closely. "Perhaps. Are they broadcasting identifiers?"

"Nothing we can pick up at this range. They're holding in a loose cluster in geosynchronous orbit."

"Protecting the Tho Yor," Eli muttered. "I can't believe Bavinyar's defense fleet is just letting them stay there."

"There's BDF ships are ringing them on all sides but no signs of conflict. It might be a standoff situation. The two forces seem roughly matched, but they're nothing our own fleet can't handle, of course."

No, but the BDF and this new group could still cause trouble, especially with forces combined. The surprise just compounded Eli's smoldering frustration. Since Milagro he'd gone over

those crucial seconds time and again, wondering what he could have done differently to capture Marasiah. He knew his biggest weakness: he'd hesitated to attack Talon.

He still couldn't figure out what his old master had been doing there. The woman he'd known had been Sith to the core of her being. From what she'd told him, her very first mission for Darth Krayt had been to kill Marasiah. Yet now, she was *protecting* her. He'd thought he was used to a galaxy upended but that, combined with Khat Lah's appearance, had taken everything to a new level.

His couldn't get his mind off Talon, even now. He wondered how four years without the Force could have changed her. He wondered if she'd renounced the Sith's teaching, as he had, and embarked on a better path. The thought actually warmed him; if true, it was proof that he'd made the right choice back on Rohakalla. In liberating the galaxy from the Force he'd freed Talon from the dark side, and that was a small victory.

What waited at Bavinyar looked like defeat. At least, it was too much for *Silencer* to handle until Chalk and Yage arrived. He said, "Captain, prepare a link to the *Jagged Fel*. I need to explain this situation to the regent."

"Of course." Morrabin snapped bony fingers, and the communications ensign began preparing the call.

Just as Eli turned for the comm station, the tactical lieutenant called him back to the sensor station. The young Devaronian said, "Sirs, we've just picked up a new reading. Another ship has exited hyperspace at the edge of Bavinyar's orbit and is falling in toward the planet."

Eli and Morrabin immediately crowded over the ensign's chair. The captain asked, "Can you get a heading?"

"Not yet, sir."

"What about the ship model?" asked Eli. "Is it a *Helox*-class?"

"Checking now, sir." The Devaronian chewed his lip with pointy teeth. "It does not appear to be a *Helox*-class. In fact... our sensors are having a hard time telling *what* it is."

Eli's stomach went cold. He peered at the ensign's screen and saw the confused data. No visible thrust-trails. It had to be Khat Lah's organic ship, and that meant the Yuuzhan Vong, and Talon and Marasiah, were all plunging toward Bavinyar now.

He opened his mouth to order a micro-jump to the planet, but words caught in his throat. He knew every second was crucial but he also knew that, even if they did jump, the Sekotan flyer was already well ahead of them. According to the sensors the ship was even now falling toward the exclusion zone. The fleet holding position in orbit was letting it pass unmolested.

If it weren't for those damn new ships, they might have intercepted Khat Lah. They would have at least tried. But any attempt would be useless; *Silencer* would be beaten back or even destroyed. They'd been outgunned and outplayed before they'd even arrived.

And now two powerful Force-users, one of them a Skywalker, were heading for the Tho Yor.

"Sirs, that ship is falling into the atmosphere," the ensign said weakly. "They're out of our reach now."

It was all Eli could do not to scream. Breathing deeply, voice very cold, he said, "Comm, get me that connection with the *Jagged Fel*. I need to speak with the regent immediately."

For Ania, everything since her capture had become a blur. The only things she remembered clearly were cold gray walls and bright light. Everything else was distorted by the drugs they kept pumping into her system, courtesy of a hovering black ball she was pretty sure was an interrogation droid. She'd never dealt with one of those before, not even when she'd gone to prison the first time.

She recalled a person interrogating her, but he was also a blur. She recalled his black shape standing before her, demanding answers and hurting her when she refused to talk. Despite her refusal, he'd found a way to get answers; she remembered that much, even if his methods escaped her. She wasn't sure what she'd told him. Sometimes she thought it was the location of the resistance fleet, but when she tried to remember it now, in her haze, she couldn't pull it up. Sometimes, with a stab of cold fear, she thought she'd revealed the location of Marasiah and her mother on Milagro, but that was something she would have guarded with her life. At least, she'd have tried to.

Ania was going through a lucid period now, relatively, and tried to piece her garbled memories into order. She recalled being strapped to a chair and interrogated by the man in black.

She also remembering lying flat on a bunk, surrounded by gray walls. She was on a bunk now too but these walls were slick metal; she'd been pressed by duracrete before. Maybe she was on a ship now. If so, they were in hyperspace, since she didn't feel the vibration of sublight. Ania had been raised on a starship and could tell that much, even in her drug-haze.

When the door to her cell opened she wasn't sure if it was real. The blurred figure was draped in black, but something told her it wasn't the one who'd interrogated her. This one was bigger, taller. More, half his face was metal with a red light in place of one eye. The last interrogator had been sinister, but this guy was on his own level.

Ania struggled to sit upright. As she did so she saw the black metal ball hovering past the man's shoulder. The interrogator droid, probably set to deliver her another dosage.

"Is it a new one?" she asked, both the droid and the man. "A new, you know, con-con-concoction? Are you g-gonna mess my mind up a new way? 'Cause I'm still f-feeling fragged."

"How long since her last dosage?" asked the man.

"Four point two-seven hours," replied the droid. "The effects peaks approximately two point eight-six hours ago."

The man leaned closer and as he did Ania could focus on his face. She saw lips pressed tight in a scowl, burn marks running down the cheek, dark heavy eyes. She also saw her own warped reflection in the metal plate covering half the face. Even in her haze she was surprised how bad she looked.

"Your friends are resourceful," he growled. "How did they get a fleet to Bavinyar so quickly?"

Ania's eyes fluttered. "Bavinyar? I... what? You mean... Sauk?"

"Sauk.... Ah, yes. Your ex-crewman. So you do have allies there. Who brought the fleet? The rebels?"

She knew that ugly face. She'd never seen it in person but she'd seen it, many times over. How could she forget a mug like that? But she couldn't place the *name*...

"I don't... don't understand," Ania muttered. "What fleet?"

"The fleeting sitting over Bavinyar *right now*!" he boomed.

Hogrum Chalk, that was it. Stupidly, Ania laughed. "Oh, *shab*... I'm really in trouble now..."

Chalk slapped her hard enough to whip her head halfway



around. There was a delay before she felt the sting, so strong.

"Your friend Sauk, did he call in the rebels? Is he the connection?"

"Rebels... no... Sauk's not with them. He went to Bavinyar to make a home, with the refugees..."

"What about Khat Lah? Tell me about him!"

"What... That Vong? I don't know anything about him. Haven't seen him in... a long time."

Politely the interrogator said, "This questioning is ineffective. The fleet appeared over Bavinyar six point nine-two standard days after the captive was apprehended. She had been placed in strict isolation since capture. She is not capable of answer your queries."

Chalk scowled at the droid but didn't argue. Instead he stood up and straightened his black robes. Dignity returned, the regent said, "Give her a dose of counteragent. I want her clear-minded by the time we reach Bavinyar."

"I can inject the counteragent but it will take one point seven hours to reach peak effectiveness. Bavinyar is one point one-eight hours away."

"Just do it," Chalk growled. "Stay in this cell and monitor her condition until I return. If she struggles, stun her."

"Yes, sir."

With the flare of his cape, Chalk spun and marched out of the cell. That droid hovered close, proffering a gleaming syringe from its stubby right arm.

"Please do not resist," the droid said, like it always did before sticking her with its needle, like she had any other choice. Generally Ania liked droids; this one she wanted to see vaped.

"Hey," she moaned, "Any chance you can tell me what happened to my friend Jao?"

Mute and menacing, the interrogator droid dropped in front of her arm and extended its needle.

"Figures," Ania whispered, then twisted her face in pain as she took her latest dose.

Cade had never been good at waiting, and the long ride from Esseles to Bavinyar was starting to wear on his nerves. Deliah was doing her best to keep him happily distracted, but even she could only do so much.

He wasn't even sure if he *wanted* to get to Bavinyar. His last trip inside a Tho Yor had been mind-bending, and his experiences on the other side of Rohakalla's gate had been even moreso. For a time he'd been trapped inside an eruption of pure Force energy so powerful it has physically dissolved Lowbacca and others who'd touched it. But because of his damned Skywalker blood, Cade had been able to hold himself together, barely.

The eruption had been a bridge and the bridge had carried Cade to a place that was not a place. Halfway merged with the Cosmic Force, he'd encountered the Whills, highly advanced beings that had communed so perfectly with the Living Force that they'd voluntarily shed their mortal frames and joined the Cosmic. Yet Cade had been able to reach beyond even the Cosmic Force, to the higher plane that Marin called the Unifying Force. He'd been able to touch it and bridge all three levels of the Force together, and in that timeless moment-before the Whills intervened and before Lowbacca pulled Cade from the eruption- he'd known that he could *become* that bridge, and in doing so open every last being in the galaxy to the unfettered Force, as it had been a hundred thousand years ago.

But the Whills had stopped him, and even with his Skywalker strength, Cade hadn't overcome. He still didn't know if they'd been right to intervene. Unleashing the Force on everyone could mean chaos. It could create a trillion more Jedi and ten trillion Sith. Cade had never been a believer in the inherent goodness of sentients; he had a hard enough time being good himself.

He prayed the Tho Yor could direct them to another planet like the one beyond the gate. Then the Jedi could make pilgrimage and open themselves to the Force one by one. One day the planet's secret and its powers would get out, but it would give the good guys a chance to restrengthen, rebuild, and right some wrongs. That was all anyone could hope for.

But if the only way for anyone to touch the Force again was for Cade to step into another eruption and wrestle once more with the Whills, he wasn't going to try. He didn't think he could succeed, and even if he could, he had no desire to be a bridge. Being a man was all he'd ever wanted.

All this time C-3PO had been nagging him to take a look at some of R2-D2's memory files. Helping the little droid put things in order alternated between amusing, affecting, and annoying, and he'd frankly liked Blue's distractions a hell of a lot more. But because he needed variety, he went to check on the droids.

He found a seemingly exact replica of the scene he'd left, astromech and protocol droids facing one another in the small rear hold. And like last time, they both turned photoreceptors to meet him.

"Hey," Cade said, lingering in the door with a hand on either frame. "I heard you had something for me, Threepio."

"Me, sir?" The droid cocked his head.

"Yeah, you said there was something you wanted me to see."

"Ah, you mean *Artoo* wanted you to see. I was merely relaying the message. He was quite insistent."

"Well, we still got a little while before we hit Bavinyar. What have you got?"

R2-D2 whistled that Cade should have a seat and watch.

It was never a good sign when somebody said you should be sitting down to hear something. Cade didn't try to guess that R2 might have for him, he just tugged an empty crate from the corner of the room, put it in front of the droid, and sat atop it.

More gamely than he felt, Cade said, "Okay, Artoo, hit me with it."

The droid whistled again and a holo-image sprang to life. He knew everyone in it, but it took him a moment to recognize them. The first one he got was his grandmother; though Jade Skywalker was decades younger than when he'd known her, her eyes and the shape of her face instantly rang true. And if this way Jade, the boys with her must have been his father and uncle. Nat was maybe ten years old, a big kid with a messy mop of light hair. Kol was four years younger, smaller with short red hair and piercing eyes.

Cade watched as his grandmother said, "I've been waiting to tell you boys this for a long time. You deserve to know how your father died."

Cade's chest tightened. He'd heard the basics from his own dad, probably a recap of this exact conversation.

Jade gestured for the boys, sitting on the floor in front of her,

to scoot closer. Nat did first, then Kol, a little hesitantly. She said, "I should have told you earlier, but it was hard. I didn't know how to do it and I didn't know if you were ready."

"I heard what they said about him," Nat said, voice hollow. "They say he hijacked a star cruiser, that he crashed it into Coruscant and killed a million people."

"And it's a lie," Jade said. "But too many people believe it."

"Is that why we never use his name, only yours?" Kol asked.

"Yes. But you're still Tainers, as much as you're Skywalkers." She swallowed, thought, and went on. "Jodram didn't do those awful things on Coruscant. Abeloth did."

"You told us dad killed Abeloth," said Nat.

"And he did. That's why you have to understand how brave your father was." She reached out to touch both of them by the hand. "Jodram was taken by Abeloth. She possessed his body as a host. She used his face to do the terrible things that she did. But Jodram was still in there, buried inside her."

"I don't understand," said Kol. "What *was* Abeloth?"

"You know what she was," said Nat. "This ancient Force-monster that sucked up souls and used Jedi's bodies. She lived for thousands and thousands of years. They say she was a human who tried to become a Celestial."

"I know, but what does that *mean*?"

Jade squeezed his hand. "Nobody really knows. Our minds aren't built to understand it. That also means, we can't completely understand what happened to your father in the end. But know this. Even though he was lost inside Abeloth, all churned around in a sea of souls, he was still your father. I felt him in the Force. I touch him and pulled him clear so he could take his body back from Abeloth for just a few seconds..." She closed her eyes, as if seeing it again. "And when he did, he took the Mortis dagger and used the Celestials' blade on himself, and Abeloth. If he'd hesitated for just a second he could have failed and Abeloth would have taken control again, but he didn't. He was brave. The bravest Jedi I ever knew."

The words were getting her choked up. Her children waited respectfully until she said, "That's why you should be proud of him, always. He was fighting an enemy he couldn't understand, one so powerful it could drown him, but he didn't give up. That's the kind of man your father was. Without understanding

or thinking he could win, he did what was *right*. That's what we should all be in the end."

She squeezed the boys' hands. Kol bent forward and Cade watched his father's small body tremble with sobs. Nat stared through the floor, lost in thought. Jade was crying too, thin wet trickles on her cheeks, but she was also smiling, a soft and loving smile. Cade that seen that smile on her many years later but he felt like he was understanding it for the first time.

When the holo winked out Cade shuddered. He took a deep breath, sucking in his own tears, and told R2-D2, "You know, for a guy whose memories are fragged up, you can read a situation so well it's scary."

R2 hooted sober agreement.

It wasn't what he'd wanted to see en route to Bavinyar, but maybe it was necessary. Skywalkers living to a ripe old age were few and far between. He strained to think of even one. His grandmother had died on Mustafar, his father on Ossus, Nat on Taivas, all of them battling the Sith. His great-grandfather Ben, he recalled, had also fallen to Sith, and everybody knew about Anakin killing Darth Sidious.

"Hey, you tin can," he said, "You know what happened to Luke? I can't remember about him. Tell he died peaceful, huh? Just give me one quiet end."

R2 made an uncertain noise, and C-3PO said, "We have still not completed collating Artoo's memories. Perhaps some information is yet to be uncovered... But as yet we haven't found it."

"And you don't got it either?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"Not in that encyclopedia you call a brain?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't call it a brain. It is a SynTech AA-1 triple-phase cognitive module. In any case, I'm afraid that information is not in my databanks. How curious."

"Well, let me know if you find anything." With effort, Cade rose off the crate. "But only if it's a happy ending, y'understand? I don't want any mopey stuff before we head into action."

R2 whistled and C-3PO said, "We quite understand, sir, and will edit out all 'mopey stuff' per your request... Or we'll try, at any rate."

“That’s all I ask,” Cade said. He left the room without looking back and decided to seek out Deliah. He could use her kind of distraction after all.

A thin layer of clouds had drifted over the refugee settlement, obscuring the sky with gray and darkening Bavinyar’s seas. As she stepped off Khat Lah’s flyer and onto the platform, water-drops flecked Talon’s vision and she wiped them away, unsure if it was sea-spray or sprinkle from above.

She felt none of it on her face. That was covered in a pink-skinned masquer, though as usual when she went incognito, her tattooed lekku were obscured by the hood of her cloak. Marasiah Fel hid in a similar garb, and it occurred to Talon they might have been taken for partners or sisters; an unpleasant thought. Also venturing outside the ship were Khat Lah and the shaper Nei Rin, both in human-looking masquers.

Their welcome party consisted of a Mon Calamari named Sauk and Azlyn Rae. The former Imperial Knight recognized her former empress beneath the hood; her eyes widened in surprise but she said nothing. She gave no reaction at all toward Talon, probably figuring she was another masquered Yuuzhan Vong.

Sauk led the six of them across the platforms, winding around sets of docked cargo ships until they reached a parked freighter with a conical forward section and bulky aft thrusters. Talon recalled the ship as belonging to Ania Solo. The landing ramp was down and Sauk took them inside the ship and down a corridor to its aft hold.

Talon took in those assembled quickly. There was no Ania Solo but her mother Marin was present, as was the assassin droid who typically shadowed Ania. Here, too, were a pair of powerfully-built Jedi. The Cathar’s eyes passed over Talon but K’Kruhk’s held on her; even without the Force the Whiphid could see through her disguise.

But the ancient Master turned his attention to Marasiah. “It’s good to see you well,” he said. “Even better to see you here.”

The ex-empress pulled the hood off her face and said, “I’m not here by choice. Our settlement on Milagro was attacked.”

“Attacked?” Marin said, alarmed. “By the Federation?”

“Stormtroopers and TIE fighters,” said Nei Rin. With a touch

to the back of her neck, her masquer peeled away to expose the shaper's tattooed face. None acted stunned by her appearance. "Khat Lah rushed in to save us, but even still, some of our shapers were killed. Others may have been captured. I do not know."

The male Yuuzhan Vong removed his own masquer and added, "Two of my warriors were killed also. The troopers were led by Eli Horn."

"I'm familiar with the name," said Marin. "So Chalk found Milagro. How? And how much damage did he do?"

"I do not know how he found Milagro," said Nei Rin, "When we escaped, it did not seem that the planet itself had been damaged. The terraforming we did there should be salvageable. We also managed to save the qahsas that contain the shaping protocols used to repair the planet's ecosystem."

"So it wasn't a total defeat," Sauk said. "That's something."

"Back to the immediate issue," said Khat Lah. "What were the ships in orbit over this site? And how did they know to let us pass?"

"Mercenaries, hired by the resistance to give us a hand." Marin crossed arms over her chest. "Apparently the rebels are short-staffed right now."

"You don't seem happy to have them," Marasiah observed.

"No, but that's my problem to deal with. That said, all of you should give those mercs a clear berth." She focused on the empress. "*Epecially* you."

Marasiah simply nodded.

"Most importantly," Khat Lah said, "what of the Tho Yor?"

The old woman exhaled. She looked around the room, and her eyes lingered knowingly on Talon before she said, "I went down. I went inside. I spoke- if that's the right word- with a being called Tasha Ryo."

"So it *is* her," said the Yuuzhan Vong. "Even though it is a different Tho Yor, on a different world."

"Well, she was less helpful this time. She insisted she had no way for us to access the Force." Just as Talon's heart fell Marin added, "I'm not sure if I believe her."

"How so?" asked Khat Lah.

"I could touch her mind but I felt her reluctance. She was afraid of something."

"Perhaps it was my uncle, coming to blast us to atoms," Marasiah said dryly.

"Not just that," Marin insisted. "She flushed me out before I could protest or struggle. And best we can tell that Tho Yor hasn't budged since."

"Then it is as I suspected," said Khat Lah. "You must take me to the Tho Yor and I will make contact."

"You don't know Tasha will accept you any better."

"No. But we must try."

"My uncle could be coming for us," Marasiah said. "Is this really the time to dive into the Tho Yor? I've heard how it left Skywalker out of commission for hours once he left it."

"The same thing happened to me," Marin admitted.

"The effects were less on me when I entered the Tho Yor on Tython," Khat Lah said. "Perhaps it is my species' physiology. But it does not matter." He sliced a hand through the air. "The enemy may be bearing down on us, but that is exactly why we must act *now*. If the Tho Yor is not awakened before they arrive, then all will be lost. Those ships in orbit cannot hold an entire Federation attack fleet."

"And one Tho Yor can?" asked Sauk nervously.

"That remains to be seen. Can you take me there? Do you have a vehicle?"

The Mon Cal nodded. "I do. And I know the way."

"Then take me immediately." He tapped the back of his neck, and the ooglith masquer emerged to wrap his head in human countenance. He turned that new face to Marasiah, Talon, and Nei Rin. "You will stay behind. Do not go on any ship besides ours and this one."

Without another word he started for the exit. Sauk stared at the others helplessly. Marin volunteered, "All right, I'll go with you. I've already done this once."

"No," K'Kruhk held up a claw. "I will accompany him. The rest of you will stay here and prepare for whatever comes."

So the Yuuzhan Vong, the Mon Cal, and the Whiphid marched from the chamber, down the ramp and out of the ship, leaving the others behind, stunned by the speed at which everything was moving and unable to guess what might come next.

Once they disappeared, everyone lingered, uncertain what



they could do. Then Talon, relinquishing herself to a long stay, threw back her hood and removed her masquer. Pain spread from her nose, past her scalp to the back of her head as the ooglith retreated, and when it was gone everyone in the hold was looking at her Sith-marked face without shock, surprise, or fear.

That would have been unthinkable once, but she knew the marvel was minor compared to what the day had in store.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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Everything changed after they lost Cev'mor. The Selvaris mission had never been easy but the team of twenty rebels had maintained cautious optimism despite the difficult terrain, smothering humidity, dangerous Vongformed plant life, and sporadic downpours.

Now they were down to twenty and it all felt different. They hadn't seen more of the Yuuzhan Vong creature that had attacked the camp and dragged poor Cev'mor away, but as they pushed south toward the prison they encountered trails in the brush clearly made by a large animal. The fact that Kyra couldn't feel the Vongformed beast in the Force put them all on edge. For years the rebels had looked on the young woman as a leader, a guide, and in many ways a good-luck token. Just going on a mission with the Force-user gave them a shield of confidence.

Now everyone was unsettled, Kyra most of all. Ganner knew she viewed the Force as a responsibility, heavy but still to be borne proudly. She reminded him of himself, when he'd been an Imperial Knight. He also knew that sometimes the Force simply wasn't enough. That had been hard for him to accept then, and it was harder for Kyra to accept now.

She didn't want words of comfort. She'd made it clear she wanted to get on with the mission and so they did. Slowing somewhat for extra caution, the project two-day trek to the prison extended to two and a half. On the afternoon of the third day the sky clouded over for what looked like another heavy cloud-burst, but to everyone's surprise it cleared away. Though the air still smelled of oncoming rain, Kyra sent the scouts,

Gresk and Selos, ahead while the others paused for food and drink.

The Bothan and the Jenet came back together thirty minutes later. The sky was still clear and both scouts were excited. Their maps had led them true: the prison lay point-nine kilometers south. And that meant it was time to get to work.

Kyra seemed eager for the action. She gathered all personnel around and brought out her small, water-proof holoprojector. Their Coruscant contacts had gotten them a basic schematic of the prison compound, and from that they'd organized their attack plan.

The compound itself was framed by a duracrete walls four meters high and topped by electrified barbed wire. Watch-towers were placed at the corner and midsections of each wall, making for eight total. Inside the walls were several buildings, only one of which had solitary confinement cells. They didn't know which cell Stazi would be in, but they at least knew where to look.

"The one good thing about this place is that security is all about keeping people inside," Kyra explained. "They're not expecting people to try and break in and that gives us an advantage. You can see this gate facing the west side. We're going to split into teams. Neuro and Alasett-" she pointed at the Skrilling and the human woman- "Take the lead here. You've got portable missile launchers. Use them on the gate. Nellis, you're our sniper. Try to clear off the watchtowers. Hide in a tree if you can."

Asaak added, "Recon scans say they've cleared all trees within ten meters of the walls. That way they'll see anybody approaching."

"Which works to our advantage too," said Kyra. "The attack on the west gate is a distraction. If you can break it open, fine, but the big charge is going to come from the east. Ganner, this was your idea. You can explain the rest."

He directed everyone's attention to the underside of the schematic and the two lit-up shafts streaking diagonally away from the compound. "The prison gets regular supply drops, but it looks like it gets water from an underground aquifer. You can see the pipeline leading directly beneath here. What we're interested in is this *other* pipeline. According to these plans, it

drops just two meters beneath ground level, then tunnels beneath the wall and goes directly west a good five kilometers, maybe more. We think it must empty out in a collecting pool, or maybe an underground cavern.”

Wendax, the team medic, frowned. “What’s it for?”

“Waste extraction,” Ganner said. Several people screwed their faces. “All the refreshers in the compound lead to this one pipe. According to the schematics it’s one solid meter in diameter.”

“I am *not* crawling up that thing,” said Gresk. That got a round of laughter, the first one since they’d lost Cev’mor.

“You don’t have to,” said Ganner. “Lazaar?”

The young man in charge of the comm system was also in charge of the second-most valuable tech item they’d brought. He tapped a square metal case they’d hauled all this way. “The remote-controlled probe in here is a quarter-meter in diameter. It should easily be able to go through the waste extraction tube, even if it is, um, partly clogged.”

“And then what?” grunted Neiro. “Sneak up a toilet?”

“The probe is also loaded with two kilograms of pure baradium,” Lazaar clarified. Somebody whistled, impressed. “When it’s directly beneath the watchtower on the western wall, we’ll detonate.”

“Bye bye wall,” muttered Gresk.

“We’ll attack them from both sides, so they won’t be able to properly defend either breach,” said Kyra. “The building where they have Stazi is on the western side of the compound, so I’ll be going through that end. That’s our Plan A. If we can get through the west side, the east side team doesn’t even need to go through the gate. Just keep them distracted and confused.”

“Are we attacking after dark?” asked Nellis.

“That’s the plan.” Kyra looked at the sky. More clouds had drifted overhead but they were pale and didn’t portend storms. A great thunderhead could really mess with their extraction, but weather here was so unpredictable they’d have to chance it.

They didn’t break the group right away. Instead they began moving south, with Gresk and Selos ranging ahead to watch the prison. Before they got a view of the compound walls they began moving west, circling carefully around the perimeter without actually coming in sight of the watchtowers. Always

they moved in single-file, causing as little commotion in the bush as possible. Once they had to veer around a fat cluster of carnivorous, thorn-tipped Yuuzhan Vong vines, but soon they'd positioned themselves on the prison's west flank.

Taking the tracker that had originally belonged to Kyra's team, Selos sneaked forward until he was at the treeline nearest to the wall. Safely hidden in the bush he stayed there with the tracker. By matching Assak Dan's device with the Jenet's, they were able to project the exact location of the western wall's central watchtower.

After that, they got to work. Finding a low spot some four hundred meters due west of the watchtower, they got out spades and began to dig. The wind was picking up, thrashing palms overhead, but the sky was clear. After less than a minute of digging in the hot sunlight, Ganner was soaking wet and so were the others. Whenever this mission ended, no matter how it ended, he'd savor the shower that came after.

Karrashakkuk was the best digger. Though his fur was by now a matted mess of sweat, dirt, and scraps of snagged foliage, the big Wookiee plowed tirelessly through the dirt until his shovel tapped against the metal of the waste extraction tube.

Soon they'd cleared away enough dirt to expose a full meter of the tube. After that Kyra did the honors, if you could call them that. Straddling the thing, a boot on either surrounding dirt-pile, she flicked on her lightsaber and cleaved through the tube. Three flicks of the blade were all it took. Ganner thought they could handle any smell after a week in the jungle, but the stench was still staggering.

Everybody cleared away except for Lazaar. Pinching his nose with one hand, he picked up the controls for his probe in the other and commanded the little drone to rise from its opened case. The grey metal sphere bravely lowered itself into the tube. Its forward light flicked on, then disappeared from view as the drone began pressing eastward toward the prison.

The sky was clouding over again and a fresh breeze blew: wet and almost cool. That definitely signified rain, and Ganner asked Kyra, "Is the plan still on?"

She looked warily at the sky but said, "It's on. Team East, start heading around the prison. Gresk, go with them and lead the way. Everyone else, we stay here."

“Should be just an hour or so ‘til sunset,” Nellis said. “Do we hold position and wait?”

“That’s right. Neuro, you handle the comm. We’ll signal when we’re ready to start.”

By the time Team East gathered its supplies and moved out Lazaar had almost finished with the machine. He reported, “I had to push through several truly disgusting clogs, but I’ve matched the probe’s location with Selos. It’s directly beneath him.”

“Well don’t blow it up yet,” Kyra said. “Hold it there for now. Nudge it the last ten meters once everything’s in position.”

“Understood.” He put down the remote control. “When do we update our friends?”

Lazaar was also in charge of the portable long-range transmitter. The device could broadcast over light-years but had to be used sparingly, lest the satellite overhead pick up the energy bursts. The plan was to signal just twice: once to announce they were in position, the second time to declare they’d recovered Stazi and needed evacuation. The first signal was just as important as the second. Selvaris was a nothing-world but it was precariously closed the Bilbringi, one of the best-fortified places in the galaxy. If it cried for help when under attack, help would come fast. That meant the satellite in orbit had to be taken out right before they made their move.

“Wait until we get in position,” Kyra told him. “We’ll watch the sky and watch the weather. And when everything looks set, we light the spark.”

Her voice was hard with determination. Ganner didn’t know if she felt the confidence she was projecting, but he did, and so did the others. They gathered their supplies, then set off together toward the prison, ready to do what they’d come here for.

When the signal came, the Rogues were on call.

The transmission burst from the Selvaris team contained no data; the burst itself was the message. The signal was caught by a sensor buoy at the edge of the system, which in turn bounced it to the resistance fleet mustered seven light-years away. When it arrived the clocks on *Paramount* were set to daylight hours

and it took only fifteen minutes to prep and fly the four Crossfires that would mount the preliminary response. The lightspeed jump from *Paramount* to Selvaris took just shy of seventeen seconds, barely enough time for Anj Dahl to tell her wingmates to get ready.

When the planet's gravity well yanked them out of lightspeed they fell fast toward the planet. Anj's nav computer linked with long-range sensors to pinpoint both the prison complex, now hidden on the planet's nightside, and the single satellite locked in orbit over the facility.

Rogue Leader pushed her ship ahead while the other three trailed behind in a diamond formation. Their S-foils were opened to attack position but it was just a precaution. There were no enemies to fight here, not yet, and the satellite itself had no shield. The second Anj's targeting computer spotted it she locked on and flew a straight inbound line, as fast as she could. As soon as she got within range, she tapped her trigger and spewed out four fast laser-bolts. Without changing course she watched them flash ahead and dwindle to nothing, then burst bright as they turned the satellite into a fireball.

With a tug of the control stick, Anj gently swerved to avoid the debris, then dropped altitude and locked her Crossfire into low orbit above the prison. Three more fighters formed up behind her, still in diamond pattern.

Rogue Three opened her comm line, the first transmission since leaving *Paramount*. "I'm having a hard time spotting the target on the surface, Lead. Lot of cloud cover down there."

Anj glanced at her own sensors. The air above the southern continent was cluttered with packets of fast-moving, water-rich clouds, periodically releasing tropic thunderstorms on the jungle below. From what she could tell, one such formation was brewing right above the prison site. From this distance she couldn't tell if it was raining, but she picked up lightning-bursts sparking through the clouds.

Whatever happened down there, she reminded herself, it wasn't her problem. She'd have enough to deal with up here.

"I spot incoming, point seven-eight," Rogue Four reported, voice tense.

Anj shifted attention upward. Her sensors picked up an old Corellian corvette exiting hyperspace. Its identification beacon

immediately marked it as one of their own. Two equally old Corellian gunships appeared after that, and all three fell toward Selvaris.

Bigger capital ships would join the party, once they were prepped. The resistance was allocating a risky amount of resources for this mission. The destruction of their orbital satellite would ring alarms on both Selvaris and nearby Bilbringi. The latter would send ships to investigate, probably a scout or frigate at first, then more forces when they realized what was happening.

Anj estimated it would take at least thirty-five minutes from first alarm to formidable response. She hoped the team on the ground would make use of every second. And when time ran out and Chalk's fleet came for them, the resistance would stand firm and hold them back for as long as it took to get Stazi out.

But for now, all Anj could do was watch one storm below and wait for another above.

A rampart of clouds had appeared from the east, riding fast wind and eclipsing twilight. Lightning flashed unseen through their upper layers and thunder shook the air below. A violet gloom deepened over the Selvaris jungle, and as the first tiny flecks of water tickled her cheek, Kyra wondered whether they shouldn't call a delay on the attack.

Ganner, crouched beside her in the brush two hundred meters from the prison wall, knew what she was thinking. "We already sent the first signal. They've probably taken out the satellite already, which means the people on the ground are going to know something's up."

"Wouldn't want to ruin the element of surprise, would we?" she muttered.

"No, we wouldn't," he said seriously.

Ganner was right. They'd come this far and couldn't let the weather spoil everything. She expected rain to come hard and pass quickly, like most Selvaris storms. The downpour might help their initial attack, then clear away by the time they'd grabbed Stazi and called for an exit shuttle.

She hoped that would happen. She didn't feel either encouragement or foreboding from the Force. It had failed her once this mission and a good being had died. For the first time



in a long while, she didn't know if she could trust it, which meant she could only trust herself.

Wind blew fast; thick clouds continued to roll. More rain fell, but only lightly. She said, "All right, let's do it."

Ganner nodded and took out his communicator. The thing was short-range but covered the far side of the compound, and after a scratch of static she heard Neuro's voice.

"We're standing by and in position," the Skrilling said.

"So are we. First signal's sent. Attack when ready."

"I've been waiting for that," Neuro said, then closed the link.

The dozen beings crouched in the brush with Kyra went silent and listened for the first strike. They were positioned a hundred meters from the clearing and could barely see the wall's blank gray face through the darkness and dense trees. They waited, hearts beating heavy, and when a deep rumble shook the forest a few of them jumped.

Kyra opened her mouth to tell them not yet, it was just thunder. Then the real boom came. With it came the sharp sound of laserfire as Neuro's team began its attack on the east gate. At the same time Nellis would be sniping, hopefully from a tree up high, picking off the watchtower guards before they knew what was happening.

From their hiding place on the west side, all Kyra saw were a few flashes of light. She asked Ganner, "How long?"

"Twenty-two seconds," he said, staring at his wrist chrono. They'd agreed to let the attack on the east gate go for seventy seconds before blowing the western wall.

The next forty-eight seconds felt interminable, but when Ganner announced it was time, Lazaar was ready. The technician gave his drone's control pad a simple tap. A split-second later, the western wall ruptured from below. This explosion was blindingly clear even through the trees. Kyra could see massive chunks of the wall take to the air and drop into the field, and smaller chunks of debris went whistling into the forest, smacking into high palms and clattering down to the dirt around them. Black smoke swirled through the night, fully eclipsing the gap they'd torn through the barrier.

The explosion was so loud Kyra could barely hear herself scream "Go! Go now!" but the others could, and they surged through the forest and into the field.

Kyra lagged a few steps behind but she was with them, holding a blaster in one hand and her inert lightsaber in the other. She tried to stay behind Selos, trusting the Jenet's excellent eyes to lead her around chunks of debris that flattered portions of tall grass. Strong wind dispersed curtains of black smoke, revealing the damage they'd done. Through the blown-open gap in the wall, at least ten meters wide, she could make out rockets impacting the eastern gate. The metal portal still held but the eastern team was attacking ferociously. Prison guards were running around the central yard in no apparent order. As the first of Kyra's team threw themselves into the rubble-strewn breach she realized no defensive fire from coming from above; Nellis must have taken care of the watch-towers already.

Propelled by adrenaline and desperate optimism, Kyra raced for the gap. Selos dropped to all fours to scamper over one chunk of the fall and into the compound. She did better, calling on the Force as she jumped and propelling herself over the debris and into the yard beyond.

The second her boots hit soft earth, the deluge started.

Rain stabbed her shoulders like a million soft knives. It turned spotlight-beams into golden waterfalls and scampering figures into black blurs. Kyra had no idea who was friend or foe; not even the Force afforded clarity in this sudden chaos. She staggered to her right and found the earth already turned to mud that sucked at her boots and tried to hold them down. Calling on the Force again she elongated her strides and tried toward the place where Stazi's bunker would be.

Something slammed into her hard from the side. Only suction from the mud kept her from falling. The one who'd knocked into her staggered into her range of vision. He pivoted and she made out an unfamiliar face and the uniform of an FCA guard.

He raised his blaster. She thumbed her lightsaber. Kyra took him before he could get a shot off, one wrist-flick and a swipe across the chest. He dropped in the mud. She tried to start forward again but the earth had grabbed her feet even tighter, sucking her boots halfway down.

Then someone grabbed her from behind and lifted her out with one tug. She knew only one being who could do that, and when she spun on Karrash she found a three-meter pile of

soaked fur where the Wookiee should be. White teeth opened amidst the mess and howled for her to follow. With massive forceful strides, Karrash charged ahead. Calling on the Force again, Kyra followed.

They ran together to the rim of a building and slammed themselves into the side. The overhang protected them from the rain but water spilled in curtains off the slanted roof, obscuring everything beyond. Thunder cracked above, matching explosions as the assault on the east gate continued. Laserfire flashed throughout the courtyard but she couldn't tell whose. The storm had turned the entire attack into a bedlam.

Karrash shook violently, giving Kyra another shower as rainwater flew off his fur. Then he pounded the building wall and roared.

Kyra asked, "This is it? Are you sure?"

He nodded and started for the entrance. He smacked the controls but, unsurprisingly, they'd been locked. Kyra stepped forward with her lightsaber and looked inside with the Force.

She felt over a dozen individual beings there. Some, probably prisoners, were confused by the commotion. A handful were concentrated and bleak, determined to defend the bunker. Those minds were just beyond the door.

Kyra hesitated for a second. Another body- Togruta, pink-skinned- plunged through the waterfall and into their dry patch.

"This is it," she told Asaak Dan, half-shouting over the downpour. "Where's Ganner? Where's *Lazaar*?" The latter had the transmitter and was supposed to signal for pickup the moment they pulled Stazi from his cell.

"I don't know," Asaak said, "But they've almost blown through the east gate."

It would be nice to have a second wave, assuming they could spot friend from foe. Kyra smacked the butt of her lightsaber on the door. "This is where we need to be. There's guards on the other side."

"I understand." Asaak lowered his blaster and reached into his equipment belt with his free hand. It came out bearing a lightsaber, and with a twitch of the thumb he summoned the blue blade. A second later a silver one extended from Karrash's furry fist.

Kyra looked between the two ex-Jedi. They seemed as ready

for action as any knight ever could. If anything happened to them, Karrash especially-

No time for that. Kyra plunged her blade into the door's upper-left edge and carved a straight line down. Asaak cut down the right side and Karrash easily swiped through the top. She could feel mounting fear and desperation on the other side as the guards watched not one but three lightsabers cleave through their locked door.

The armored portal held, even with its frame cut out. Kyra took a breath, forced her mind off the all the rain and chaos, and found some inner stillness. Then she gave the door a fierce inward push, shooting it into the hall, crushing the first layer of guards. The second rank recovered from shock and began pouring rifle-fire through the door.

Hefting her saber in both hands, Kyra led Asaak and Karrash into chaos renewed.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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The skies over the refugee camp had darkened and misty rain came down in curtains, sprinkling puddles onto the web of connected landing platforms and turning the surrounding ocean into churning spray.

Despite that, Azlyn Rae stood outside beneath *Free Agent's* cockpit section, only partially shielded from the weather. The company inside was making her anxious. Alone she could have handled her former empress, a not-quite-former Sith, and an old ex-Jedi who still commanded the Force. All together they seemed to portend an unthinkable climax.

As she watched the rain fall she allowed herself to think of Ganner. She understood why he'd joined the rebels in their hopeless fight against Hogrum Chalk, but she doubted he'd find the purpose he needed there. She wondered if he was in the middle of whatever desperate battle had claimed most of the rebels' resources. Knowing Ganner, he almost certainly was. Even when he'd been an Imperial Knight and the calm moral balance to his friend Antares, there'd been a recklessness in Ganner's nobility. He was a man who yearned to fight the good fight, but Azlyn doubted any fight was wholly good, and without the Force Ganner had no defense against the bad.

She didn't feel comfortable asking the Force to protect Ganner. Because she had nothing to pray to all she could do was wait and hope.

When she spotted a smooth-hulled, oblong airspeeder pierce the rain-curtains and descend to a smaller landing pad nearby, Azlyn wasn't sure it was the one Khat Lah had taken out. Nonetheless she trotted out into the rain for a closer look. She

was ten meters away when the side hatch opened and the unmistakable form of K’Kruhk emerged. The great Whiphid cradled a humanoid body in his arms: Khat Lah. Sauk emerged behind them and closed the speeder’s hatch.

Azlyn jogged ahead, kicking up spray from the thickening puddles. Before she reached them, Khat Lah’s limbs flailed. K’Kruhk lowered him and helped the Yuuzhan Vong stand on shaking feet.

“You’re all right!” Azlyn said in surprise, but as she got closer she saw Khat Lah’s hands were shaking fiercely and he could only stand with K’Kruhk’s help. His Yuuzhan Vong physiology might be able to withstand the inside of the Tho Yor better than a human’s, but it was still difficult for him.

“Come on,” Azlyn said, taking up Khat Lah’s other side and hoisting his arm over her shoulder. “We need to get you back to the ship.”

“N-N-No,” he stammered. “To m-m-my, ship, *mine!*”

Even with two bodies trying to hold him, Khat Lah veered away from *Free Agent* and attempted the longer path to his parked Sekotan flyer.

“We’ll stay with him,” Azlyn told Sauk. “You go back to *Free Agent* and tell them he’s back.”

The Mon Cal nodded and ran through the rain back to Ania’s ship. Azlyn and K’Kruhk stayed with Khat Lah, supporting him on either flank as they moved to the flyer as fast as they could. Khat Lah wore no ooglith and water poured down his leathery face. Thankfully, in this downpour there was no one to see an unmasked Yuuzhan Vong helped across the docking zone by a scar-faced human and a Whiphid.

When they reached the cover of the flyer the landing ramp lowered and they hauled him inside. Other Yuuzhan Vong crowded around and helped move their leader to the cockpit. Hands still shaking and stuttering all the while, Khat Lah barked orders in his own language, incomprehensible to Azlyn or K’Kruhk. The other Vong dropped him in one of the cockpit chairs and affixed a cognition hood over his face. The translucent mask, connected by tangled umbilical to the body of the ship, looked grotesque to Azlyn, but she knew this was how Yuuzhan Vong communicated with their ships.

While the other Vong crowded around Khat Lah, K’Kruhk

pulled Azlyn aside. She asked the Whiphid, “Okay, do *you* know what the hell is going on?”

“No,” K’Kruhk shook his long head. “Khat Lah entered the Tho Yor through a portal of light, then emerged less than a minute later. We recovered his body and took him back as quickly as we could. He was... as you’ve seen him.”

“Awake and responsive, but jittery as hell and not explaining anything?”

K’Kruhk snorted. “Just so.”

“What’s the hood for? This ship hasn’t started up, so what’s he doing? Calling someone?”

“That is my impression.”

“But who? I know, I know. Nobody knows, except... *them*.” She waved a hand at the Vong.

One of the group, a warrior with both tattoos and facial scars, approached them. “I apologize for the confusion. Khat Lah needed to use our transmission system right away.”

Azlyn was so shocked by this one’s perfect Basic she didn’t respond. K’Kruhk asked, “To whom is he speaking?”

“Friends,” the Vong said evasively.

“And are they coming here?” asked Azlyn.

“That is unlikely. And probably extremely dangerous. However, we may need them.” Azlyn didn’t understand what he was getting at. The Yuuzhan Vong looked between them and said grimly, “A Federation fleet arrived six minutes ago. Bavinyar is now under siege.”

The task force spread out over Bavinyar in a classic targeted interdiction formation for a medium-technology world. Bavinyar had no planetwide shield generator and its ground-based anti-orbital defenses were limited to a handful of launchers on islands near Cephalia. The capital was currently not of interest and halfway around the planet from the true target zone in the northwest hemisphere, so when positioning his forces Admiral Yage wisely kept them clear of the capital’s missiles. Sixty percent of his ships hung above the target zone itself, though as yet none had ventured close enough to fire turbolaser blasts into the ocean.

The planet’s designated protectors were the eight ships in the Bavinyar Defense Forces, which currently hung in mid-level

orbit and formed a loose halo around the half-dozen other warships Eli had warned about. Now that the Federation fleet was close to the planet they were able to read identification signatures and determine those six ships belonged to the Black Spear Company, a mercenary band hired by undetermined parties. As of yet neither group of ships had taken action against each other or the Federal fleet. It was a three-way standoff, but if action broke out the Federation ships would dominate and all sides knew it.

Admiral Yage's *War Hammer* had pulled to the fore of the formation over the target zone and would, if necessary, lead the attack. Eli Horn's *Silencer* edged close to the larger ship and was ready to leap into the atmosphere if it was necessary. The *Jagged Fel* hung back, protected by a screen of two star destroyers, three frigates, and numerous smaller support ships. Standing on its bridge, Hogrum Chalk could see the blue-white blaze of their engines arrayed in precise formation against the cerulean swirl of the planet below.

As he watched the ship's captain, a stout grey-haired human named Worgaan, came up beside him. "Regent, Admiral Yage is requesting orders."

"Tell him to hold formation. Have communications prepare me a transmission with the mercenaries. I want to talk to their leader."

"Understood, sir."

Hogrum followed Worgaan to the comm section. In addition to the usual staff of ensigns and lieutenants, all seated at their consoles in the rear-port corner of the bridge, there was Astraal Vao. The Twi'lek, blue in her white civilian clothes, looked out of place on the command deck. She met Hogrum's eye as he approached but hung at the rearmost console, where he'd tasked her to stay. He'd first thought against bringing her at all but had relented with the knowledge that he was already starting off a political firestorm on Coruscant.

He couldn't deal with that now but he couldn't ignore it either, so he'd charged Astraal with manning that console and keeping an open line to his deputies in Galactic City. She'd inform him of emergencies and relay his responses while allowing him to focus on Bavinyar itself. It had seemed the best compromise for a bad situation.



The regent turned to the primary comm console, ignoring her eyes on his back. Captain Worgaan had already relayed the order, and the lieutenant reported, "Sirs, I've patched in the hail to the lead carrier. They've requested I hold."

Hogrum growled deep in his throat and said nothing. The lieutenant shifted nervously as the regent peered down his shoulder for another minute before the console lit up.

"Ah, a response!" the young man said, a little shrilly. "Their leader is ready to speak with you."

"Where is the transmission coming from?"

"It appears to be the carrier, sir."

"Could they be relaying it from another location?"

"Possibly, sir, but we don't have the equipment to track it right now."

"Very well. Put him on."

The lieutenant and the captain leaned back so Hogrum could move fully in front of the holo-projector. He was surprised to see the image of a short-haired young woman. Despite her smooth face she looked appropriately mercenary, with black armored shoulder-pads and hard eyes.

"Are you the commander of the Black Spear Company?" asked Hogrum.

"I am. You should know, Regent, there's no point in trying to outbid my current employer."

"Is that so? Do they have more wealth than the Federation?"

"It wouldn't do any good for our reputation to switch sides before the start of a battle."

"That may be true. Tell me, Miss- ah, I did not get your name."

"Sora Auchs," she said, eyes hard.

Well, that explained a little. Hogrum's spies had informed him how the Mandalore Yaga Auchs had met his end, executed by his own lieutenants for treason. They had nothing to say about his daughter, but it was clear the young woman had amassed a respectable mercenary company of her own since leaving the Mandalorians. Respectable, but new and hard-pressed to prove themselves.

Depending on Sora Auchs' resolve, it might take a lot to break through her lines. That meant the BDF's role was all the more important.

“Miss Auchs,” he said, “Do you have any idea what it is you’re charged with protecting?”

He noticed nearby crew perk in attention. The *Jagged Fel*’s staff, and all of Yage’s people, were confused and curious about this mission and Chalk had taken no steps to enlighten them.

“I was hired to do a mission,” Auchs said. “I honor my contracts.”

“I respect your professionalism, but you chose jobs poorly. All I want is the chance to drop one turbolaser volley at a submerged target. No settlements will be destroyed. No people will be killed. Just one simple volley is all I need.”

“You came prepared for a lot more than that.”

“I came prepared because *you* did, Miss Auchs. My ships will shred your blockade if you force us to. For all our sakes, it would be better if you didn’t.”

“You know my position, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Then so am I. Goodbye, Miss Auchs.”

On Hogrum’s signal, the lieutenant shut off the transmission. Worgaan asked, “Do we begin attack maneuvers now, sir?”

“No, next we talk to BDF. If they’re not in a treasonous mood, they should provide assistance. Lieutenant, please—”

“Regent Chalk,” said a soft, familiar voice behind him.

Hogrum turned and glared down on his aide. “This is not the time, Miss Vao.”

Without backing down Astraal said, “I’ve just been bounced a priority message from General Jaeger at Bilbringi. He insists you see it right away.”

Hogrum wanted to tell her off, but this was what he’d brought her for. Jaeger was one of his best commanders, and while the man hadn’t been appraised of the Bavinyar situation he’d know not to contact Hogrum except for the best reasons.

“All right,” he relented. “Be quick.”

“The general reports that they’ve just lost communication with the prison colony on Selvaris. His message said the satellite was non-responsive and he’ll dispatch a scout ship to the system.” Astraal paused, then added, “He said you’d want to be notified.”

Astraal didn’t know it, but after the rebel attack on Praxal VII, he’d placed the prisons holding Stazi and Senator Kaige on

high alert. He'd requested any usual activity be brought to his immediate attention, and this was it.

What happened at Selvaris could be just as important as what happened here, but he couldn't afford to be distracted. There was no sense taking risks either. He said, "Tell Jaeger to send whatever capital ships he can move on short-notice and prepare for a larger response. Tell him to ready a star destroyer."

Astraal blinked in surprise. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Tell him to treat Selvaris with highest priority. Do it now."

"Yes, sir," the Twi'lek snapped a brief bow and went back to her station.

For a moment it had seemed like he was in control of the situation; now it was spilling out of control again. Chalk spun back to the main comm console and asked, "Are we ready?"

"Yes, sir," the shaky lieutenant said. "We have a line patched directly to the BDF flagship."

"Excellent." Hogrum tugged his robes straight around him. "Open the channel."

The holo appeared with another surprise. Hogrum had been expecting to see some Bavinyari naval officer in those dark-colored uniforms they wore. He got one of those and more: a Mon Calamari in elegant robes whom he recognized at once.

"Senator Gahan, I was not expecting you," he said, polite but stern. "You should have informed me if you wanted to observe the situation on Bavinyar. You'd be much safer aboard the *Jagged Fel*."

"I wanted to be able to observe my constituents directly- and their allies, like Captain Rand of the *Jereveth Syne*."

And, most likely, do something underhanded behind his back. Hogrum had allowed the senator to act freely these past three years because of her visible position and broad public support; once this was over, he'd find cause to imprison her for a very long time.

"In that case, Senator, I hope you're convinced Captain Rand of the need to lay down arms. We have only the best interests of this planet at heart."

"That remains to be seen," said Rand. He was a trim, fit-looking human with black hair and a beard going gray. "Regent, please state why you've brought a full battle fleet to our world."

“There is an imminent threat to the entire Federation hidden on your world,” Chalk said. “A group of rebel leaders- the same terrorists who launched the attack on Galactic City three years ago, and orchestrated an assassination outside your capital- are using Bavinyar as a hiding place. They can’t be allowed to escape.”

Rand frowned. “You should have approached us through proper channels. Bavinyar has cooperated well with your security forces in the past.”

“On this no one could be trusted. This mission is too critical. That’s why I’ve come myself to oversee the operation.” It was the line he planned to feed the Senate and the press, and he waited for Gahan to contradict him, but the Mon Cal remained silent. Hogrum added, “You can see our forces are arrayed nowhere near Cephalia or your other major settlements. We have no intention of harming them, or you. Our concern is solely with the rebels’ submarine base. It is your duty, as members of the Federation, to help us destroy these terrorists.”

That was raising the stakes, but Rand didn’t flinch. “The Bavinyar Defense Force predates the Federation, the Galactic Alliance, and even the Empire, sir. For three hundred years we’ve guarded this world-”

“Except for the thirty years you were chased across the stars Palpatine. I know your history, Commander. I respect your people’s pride and professionalism.” He’d forgotten how tiresome these provincial patriots could be.

“I’d hope you’d respect our sovereignty as well,” said Rand.

“You’ve allowed a band of mercenaries to hold position in your space without chasing them away. How do you square *that* with protecting sovereignty?”

He scowled. “There was... much confusion as to who hired Black Spear Company, and why.”

“And can you illuminate me? I’ve spoken to their commander already. She’s tight-lipped, determined, but also young. She has her own interests at heart, certainly not yours.”

“You ask me to trust that you do, sir?”

Hogrum was getting tired of this. “I am the regent of the Galactic Federation. I hold the interest of *all* worlds close. Do your duty as members of the Federation, Captain. Help clear away these mercenaries and let us rid your planet of terrorists.”

“Do I have your guarantee that you will *only* attack the submarine rebel base?”

Now they were getting somewhere. “I swear it, Captain.”

But Rand shifted uncomfortably. “I’ll have to relay this to my government before I respond.”

Hogrum held back a growl. “Be swift about it. Don’t give the rebels more time to escape. And Senator Gahan, I dearly hope you convince the captain to comply.”

He didn’t need to threaten her more. The Mon Cal responded with a simple nod. And then the holo winked out, leaving everything still in limbo.

When Hogrum Chalk’s image disappeared, Saaraï could barely restrain herself from hurrying across the *Jereveth Syne*’s bridge to Monia. Instead she held near the rear entrance, where Jao Assam and Yalta Val were anxiously planted in their hastily-fitted senatorial guard uniforms, audience rather than participants in this drama.

Captain Rand turned on Monia and said, “Frankly, Senator, your lack of support for your regent was deafening.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that there’s a rebel base there.” She spread webbed hands. “What I know is that I haven’t seen any evidence, or even heard about a base until just now.”

“Then what *is* inside the exclusion zone? The Resettlement Authority won’t tell us, but they’re *your* people. You should know.”

Rand was angry and impatient, and frankly had every right to be. Saaraï couldn’t tell which way he’d jump. She wasn’t even sure where she wanted him to go. If he threw his lot in with Chalk and helped destroy the mercenaries- probably the smartest move- the Tho Yor could be destroyed in minutes. If he stayed neutral or even helped the mercenaries, he might buy time for the Jedi on the surface to do whatever they could with the Tho Yor.

Saaraï’s heart twisted as she tried to weigh whether she hated a Chalk victory more than she feared the Force awakened.

Carefully, Monia said, “I’ve seen the survey teams’ maps of the exclusion zone. I saw nothing like what Chalk suggests.”

“Then what *is* down there? What could possibly be worth all

of this?" Rand waved toward the viewport, through which the Federation fleet could be seen as gray flecks against starlight.

Monia shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to say."

Rand scowled at her, but the man wasn't a fool. He knew that Monia was willing to invite the wrath of her own regent to protect whatever was down there. He was stuck in the middle of a situation he hadn't wanted and which beggared his understanding. And that meant he was going to fall back on his most basic purpose: protecting his homeworld.

"Senator, I need to consult with my government," Rand said. "Please wait with your staff on the bridge."

With that he retreated across the deck, taking long fast strides to his personal command salon aft of the bridge. Monia retreated to the corner where Saara, Jao, and Val were clustered.

"We have to get the BDF to side with the mercenaries," Jao whispered. He always seemed to know what had to happen. "It's the only way to hold back Chalk."

"Chalk's brought enough ships to crush the BDF *and* the mercenaries," Monia said wearily.

"Yes, but will he? Think. Bavinyar is a member world of the Federation. If he attacks their planetary militia--"

"He'll claim they attacked him," Val interjected. "But either way, it will invite political crisis. It could even break his government, depending on how the senate reacts."

"The question is, how far is Chalk willing to go to destroy that Tho Yor?" said Saara. "We know how ruthless he is, but everything he's done has been calculated to win public support. Firing on Bavinyar, especially if the local government forbids it, could wreck everything he's been building."

"He'll want that Tho Yor destroyed," Jao said firmly. "And it's not just the Tho Yor down there." He lowered his voice. "There's Jedi, and maybe even Skywalkers."

Saara had no love for Jedi and none of Skywalkers. If they were wiped out she'd rage not for their deaths but for Chalk's victory. Torn by indecision, she thought back to Porat. In the months after his death, when she'd found herself at an impasse, she'd ask herself what he would do. She'd done less of that over time, and it was almost comforting to fall back into that corner of imagination.

When she consulted the Porat in her mind, the answer became immediately, chillingly clear. Her husband had been ambivalent about Jedi and the Force, but he'd been adamant against Imperial tyranny. Chalk presented a new, kinder face for that oppression but the kindness was all lies, masking a peace built on innocent blood. Porat's blood.

Saarai couldn't stand that. She couldn't deface her husband's memory, and if, by some astronomical chance, the Jedi down there really did find a way to resurrect the Force, she'd deal with its chains when they were shackled on her.

At least that way she could face bravely face the memory of the one being who'd ever loved her. And she could strike back, just a little, at the man who'd killed him.

Saarai drew in breath and said, "Excuse me, Senator. I need to talk to the captain."

Monia and Jao blurted her name as she started for the door through which Rand had left. She only stopped when she heard a commotion from the opposite side of the bridge.

"That's another incoming ship all right," one crewman said. "It's running the Fed blockade!"

"What do we do?" a lieutenant looked around for orders.

Another, maybe the first officer, said, "Hold position. Where's the ship now?"

"Trying to get past the Fed line. It's got TIEs chasing it."

"Then hold position. Do nothing. Let the Feds and mercs sort it out." The officer chewed his lip. "What kind of ship is it?"

The lieutenant checked his board. "Sensors show it as a light freighter, sir. Looks like... *Helox*-class, heavily modified."

And from the back of the bridge, Jao gave a loud, dry, disbelieving laugh. "Of *course* he'd show up now!"

As she pulled out of a twist and accelerated her TIE Predator onto the trail of that damned familiar ship- one massive dorsal-mounted engine, flat wings on either side, red hull marked by black crossbones- Gunner Yage muttered under her breath, "Of course you'd show up now, you son of a murglack."

Along with everyone else aboard *War Hammer*, even her father, Gunner had frankly no clue why they'd hurriedly laid siege to Bavinyar. Something about a rebel enclave, apparently, but her gut had told her there was more to it than that. Seeing

her half-brother's ship streaking toward the exclusion zone was pretty much proof.

"That ship's fast for an old hauler, but I think we can take her," Skull Two's voice said in her ear. He was a young pilot and hadn't been with the Skulls during their past encounters with *Mynock*.

"Two, Three, get ready for a pincer maneuver," Gunner said. "Take them on their port flank. Four, with me. We're hitting them from starboard."

The four TIEs in Gunner's flight split into halves, each rolling away, then arcing toward *Mynock*. The ship had been cutting a straight line to the exclusion zone and the batch of mercenary ships orbiting above it, but when he saw the four TIEs coming at him Cade twisted his ship off-course. Easier for Gunner to catch up, harder for Two and Three.

"We'll take him first, Four," she told her wingman. "Stay with me!"

Gunner kicked power to engines. *Mynock* was faster than it looked but a TIE Predator was faster still. Cade saw her coming, of course, and adjust angle again to dive back toward the exclusion zone, flashing bright blare from his big engine at her viewport.

Gunner had chased this ship before, and even flown alongside it at the end of the war with Krayt. She knew what came next and nudged her ship downward, avoiding a spray of laserfire from *Mynock*'s dorsal laser turret. Four's response was delayed by a split-second and he yelled, "Stang, they scorched me! Starboard solar panel's hit."

"Hold on behind me," Gunner said and glanced at her scanners. Skulls Two and Three were arcing around to come at Cade from his flank. In less than one minute they'd enter the firing range of those mercenary ships. Anything could happen.

Scowling, she pumped a directional comm transmission vectored dead ahead. "*Mynock*, this is Skull Leader," she called. "Damn it, Cade, answer me!"

There was nothing for five critical seconds before a static-blurred groan crackled over her headset. "Why did it have to be *you*?" her half-brother groaned.

"I was going to ask you the same thing. What are you doing here?"



"This ain't exactly the time to explain."

As he said it Cade fired engines and streaked a straight line for the exclusion zone. He was gambling on getting to the mercenary ships before the Skulls opened fire. That alone made Gunner want to tap her trigger but she said, "Cade, are there rebels here? What's going on?"

"*E chu ta*, Gunner, if *grancha* rebel bosses were here you think they'd be using mercs to defend? You're an Imp but you ain't stupid."

"Then what *is* happening? Tell me or damn it, Cade, I will shoot you down."

"No, you won't," he said seriously. "You want the full story, try asking Chalk. Talk to you later, Gunn. *Mynock*, out."

As soon as the transmission closed a new one opened, Skull Four begging, "Lead, do we take the shot? Two and Three are almost on him!"

Gunner felt like punching the walls of her cockpit. Cade was streaking ahead, seconds from the shelter of the mercenary fleet. He was proof that whatever was going on here wasn't as the regent said it was. And as aggravating as her half-brother was, she found she couldn't pull the trigger on him.

So stabbed her comm controls she barked, "Two, Three, hold position. Leave *Mynock* to me."

As soon as she spoke the ship's name she realized she shouldn't have, but she also shouldn't have given the stand-down order. As *Mynock* raced into the almost-friendly embrace of the mercenary ships, Gunner sprayed a volley of laserfire at the ship and Four joined in. Her shots went purposefully wide; Four's splattered pointlessly on its aft shield. Maybe it wouldn't look like she'd botched pursuit on purpose, but if her father had been watching the engagement from *War Hammer*, he'd see through it all.

But that was another challenge to face. As *Mynock* slipped through the mercenary ships and fell toward the planet, Gunner wheeled her TIE around and called to her pilots, "Skulls, on me. We're falling back to the line."

With wordless assent, all three TIEs formed behind her and retreated back to *War Hammer*, leaving Bavinyar and Cade behind them.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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Though he wore only a loose prisoner's jumpsuit, Gar Stazi stood facing the door of his cell with one foot staggered before the other, knees slightly bent, elbows crooked and hands closed to fists. He was ready for anything.

He'd been sleeping when the great thunder nearly knocked him from his bed. Old combat instincts had kicked in; he'd stood up, looked around, listened and tried to make sense of things as best he could, which admittedly wasn't much given his confinement.

But he could hear a ferocious melee now. Given the level of armor and insulation this bunker had, the fighting could only be happening inside its walls. He heard the tang of laserfire and a heavy crashing sound, like two big metal slabs colliding. He thought he heard shouts of panic too, all drawing nearing. There was another noise, muffled by the heavy cell door, but the faint humming seemed half-familiar.

He heard another blaster fire, very close, and the thud of body hitting hard floor. It was right outside now. Stazi stepped to the door, lifted his fists, and waited for whatever came through.

He stood so close he was nearly speared through by the glowing blade that stabbed through the metal. He jumped back, dropping hands and warrior's poise in shock as weapon- the *lightsaber*- carved through his door in smooth, elegant swipes. It was white, the color of Imperial Knights. He was trying to make sense of that when the cut-out section of his door was wrenched clear and thrown into the hall.

Standing before him, hefting the white blade, was a human woman he'd never seen before. She was young, dark-haired,

soaking wet and half-caked in mud. When she looked at him she exclaimed, “*Now* we got it right!”

Two more figures shouldered in, each baring lightsabers of their own. One was a great Wookiee, not Lowbacca but another one. He’d seen the pink Togruta before, met him. Was this Asaak Dan? Were the Jedi *back*? Had they regained the Force?

“You’ve got a lot of questions,” the human said, “But now’s not the time.”

As the human took Stazi’s arm and pulled him through the broken door, he nearly stumbled over the body of a guard prone in the hallway. The sound of violence had vanished from this corridor but he could hear more, muffled and distant, apparently from outside.

Slightly dazed, he said, “I take it I’m being rescued.”

“That’s right, sir,” said the Togruta. “And you have no idea what we’ve been through to get here.”

“I might.” He recalled his last time outside his cell. “Where is Zegorian? The warden, have you found him?”

“I don’t know, sir, it’s a little messy out there.” The Togruta took his shoulder and told the human, “Kyra, we need to find Lazaar.”

“Got it. Let’s get out of here.”

Bravely, the young woman held her lightsaber in front of her and started toward the exit. The other Jedi stood on Stazi’s flanks and followed her back to the fray. He joined them, sparing one second to stoop low and grab the dead guard’s rifle. He didn’t know what fight he was getting in to, but he wasn’t going in helpless.

To her dismay, Anj Dahl had underestimated the alacrity of the enemy response. She’d expected them to send a small scout to investigate the loss of contact with Selvaris. Instead two gunships and an *Ardent*-class fast frigate arrived, just nineteen minutes after she’d blown the satellite.

Alliance pilots liked to call the *Ardent*-class a mini-Impstar, and not just because it looked like one. The wedge-shaped ship had powerful guns, sturdy shields, and a respectable complement of three TIE squadrons for support. They were already spilling out of its ventral hangar and leaping ahead to engage.

Thankfully, the resistance had used its time to shore up its advantage. In addition to the corvette and gunships, one MC160 Mon Cal cruiser, *Seaflower*, had joined them, along with its complement of Crossfires and Twintails. For now they still had a numerical advantage over the enemy. Anj just hoped the evacuation call came before time ran out.

Storms still washed across Selvaris' southern continent, obscuring the site of the prison. Anj, along with a full Rogue Squadron, pulled out of lower orbit and soared to help the fight higher up. Explosions began to burst through space, the scattered flares of a large dogfight.

"Alright, everybody, you know the drill," she told her pilots. "Get a target, get a lock, and let a torp rip before they know we're onto them. After that, break and bust 'em up the best you can."

The Rogues clicked affirmatives. She watched her targeting screen until she was close enough to track both friendlies and enemies as they tangled above Selvaris. The gunships from both sides were moving not the fray too, picking off hostile starfighters with quick turret guns. *Seaflower* and the Federation frigate were holding back, as though sizing each other up for a brawl.

But not yet. As Anj watched the fighters and waited to hit firing range, she saw some TIE Predators peel out of the fight and begin cutting straight lines toward them.

"Looks like we've been spotted," she called. "Everybody, shift targets. Lock on incoming. Fire at will and scatter."

The Crossfires and TIEs barreled toward each other through the void. They seemed far away still but Anj knew how the gap would close with frightening speed. She shunted extra power to forward shields, picked one TIE out of the formation, got her lock, and concentrated on nothing else.

And here was the worst part of these suicidal charges. The sooner she fired her torp, the sooner she could break free and the more time the TIE would have to evade the warhead. The longer she waited the better chance she had of making a hit, and being hit, and even colliding with the enemy ship. She'd heard how on backwater planets kids would stand in front of speeder buses, daring them to hit. This was like that but even deadlier.

But she waited arduous seconds as that TIE grew closer. It wasn't slowing down and neither was she. It seemed to grow by inches and then, as she'd known it would the ship exploded in size as they neared the point of collision. Its emerald laserfire spewed out and splattered on her shields. As she went blind Anj tapped the trigger, released her torpedo, and climbed. The TIE moved to evade but she tracked it with her sensors and triggered her laser cannons, spewing her own red plasma bolts that tracked ahead of the TIE and flashed in its face, forcing it to slow and juke again, but in that split-second the torpedo caught up with it, burst through its strained shields, and detonated.

The explosion was bright and brief. Anj pulled well clear of the fireball and checked her sensors. One Rogue down, ejected. Others were tangling with their TIEs and other still were joining the fray.

And the fray was about to get bigger. She checked longer-range sensors and saw more big ships had exited hyperspace. She was shocked to see another Mon Cal cruiser, two more gunships, and *Paramount* itself. Half the resistance fleet had shown up, probably in preparation for Federation reinforcements. They were in it to finish now, win or lose.

All they needed was the signal from below. Anj threw a frustrated glare at Selvaris, then joined the expanding battle.

The downpour had stopped as suddenly as it had begun and left behind a mire. The prison's western wall had been blown apart and the eastern gate blown through. Chunks of debris large and small were scattered across the inner yard, many of them half-submerged in the mud. All the while rain continued to fall, a light mist instead of a deluge but enough to keep the ground and combatants waterlogged.

Because it was so hard to move around, the guards and rebels alike had taken to cover and were holding position, exchanging bursts of laserfire from behind makeshift shields. The battle was on verge of turning into a stalemate, and Ganner was getting frustrated. He crouched behind the wreckage of a four-person speeder that had attempted to gain aerial supremacy of the fight, only to get taken down by one of Neuro's shoulder-mounted rockets. The bulky Skrilling squatted in the mud

beside Ganner and sporadically peeked his heavy repeating blaster over the rim of the speeder as it wallowed on its side, stuck in the mud.

"You're sure you saw them go into the bunker?" Ganner shouted as Neiro ducked beneath return fire.

"I didn't see them, but Leevno saw three lightsabers bust down the door." Neiro looked at the body of the Rodian, who'd been too slow to duck.

Ganner would have to take the word of the dead. He peeked around speeder's front bumper, now a vertical barricade, and saw rainwater still spilling off the low building's roof. He bent back under cover and looked for the slab of western wall that Lazaar was hiding behind. He thought he saw the comm technician still alive and under cover, but in the darkness it was hard to be sure.

Then Neiro yelled, "They're out! They're out!"

Ganner looked back to the bunker and saw the door opened. Four figures were running out into the night, three with blazing lightsabers, plus one more with a rifle. Kyra was in the front, nimbly batting back laserfire with the grace only the Force allowed. Asaak and Karrash stayed close to the fourth figure, and as all of them ducked for cover behind a broken chunk of wall their lightsabers flashed close, illuminating the flat, familiar face of the Duros they'd rescued.

That was it. Ganner's heart surged. He turned to Lazaar's hiding spot and screamed as loudly as he could, "Do it! Call for evac! Do it now!"

A shadow moved behind the slab. Lazaar turned toward him, halfway rising like he was straining to hear what had been said.

That was when a laser blast skimmed over the top of the slab and took him in the head. The young man dropped, instantly dead.

"No!" Ganner shouted. "No! No! No!"

They'd come too close to fail. Without thinking he rushed out from behind the downed speeder. He tried to sprint but mud grabbed his legs and stole his purchase. He tumbled face-forward in the muck, a lucky fall as laserfire sizzled over his prone back. He kept crawling, churning the mud with elbows and knees, inching toward the slab, Lazaar's body, and the transmitter in his backpack. Ganner heard an explosion and

looked sideways at a fireball bursting from one of the guards' positions. Somebody had probably used up their last grenade to give him cover, so he bravely pushed himself halfway upright and tried running again.

He made it three long steps, four, five. Lazaar was almost within reach. Six, seven. Scalding pain burned through his left shoulder and consumed his arm but Ganner kept trudging. When he thought he could make it he dove, landing face-first against Lazaar's body. He tugged his legs behind cover of the slab, curled himself around the wet, still-warm corpse, and began pulling apart the man's bag with his one good hand.

He found the transmitter, still running despite the rain. It was a simple device but he struggled to remember how to use it. The orange button? No, green. He stabbed it. Beneath the sound of laserfire he heard a single happy chime. Signal sent.

That was when the pain caught up to him. Ganner slumped against the corpse, panting and groaning, and squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe their ride would come. Maybe he'd die here. He was too exhausted to care. He had done what he could.

That was what mattered. He'd done what he could.

Anj had just cleared off Rogue Five's tail and was forming up on his wing when a priority hail came in from *Paramount*.

She opened the link and said, "Tell me this is good news."

"We've got the second signal," said Sukharr himself.

"You mean they've got Stazi?"

"It seems so. *Seaflower* just launched a recovery shuttle."

"Permission to fly its wing?"

"You'd do it anyway," the Trandoshan grunted a laugh. "Keep it safe, Captain Dahl."

"You bet." She switched freqs and told the Rogues, "All ships, form on me. We've got the signal, repeat, we've got the second signal! The rescue shuttle's on its way down and we're flying cover."

She let her pilots indulge in a few triumphant whoops, then, swung her nose to Selvaris' black face and fired her engines. None of the TIEs they'd been tangling with turned to pursue, which meant- hopefully- they were still ignorant of the situation on the ground. So far the resistance ships had kept the TIEs busy in orbit and prevented them from getting into the

atmosphere, but that could change at any time.

The time might come soon. As she plunged toward Selvaris, Anj marked new arrivals on her long-range scanners. Two more *Ardent*-class frigates and *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer. They were bringing out the big guns now, and while the resistance could hold them back for a while they'd never win.

All the more reason to get Stazi out fast. Anj felt Selvaris' gravity take hold of her ship and accelerate its plunge, as though the planet was as eager as her to get this done.

The raining had finally stopped and the clouds passed on, but Kyra could only spare the shortest glance at the twinkle of starlight overhead. The sizzle and flare of deadly laser blasts demanded attention. She hunkered with Stazi, Asaak, and Karrash beneath the piece of broken wall, and like the two ex-Jedi she'd swapped her lightsaber for a blaster rifle and periodically sprayed shots into the muddy yard around them, vague suppression fire to keep the guards from advancing.

She had no idea how many were left or how many had been killed. She had no idea what kind of counter-offensive they might muster with the rain finally gone. She only knew that the longer they stayed here, the less likely they were to get out.

After peeking above the wall's rim and firing off a few shots, Stazi asked, "Are you sure help is on the way?"

"Ganner sent the signal," insisted Asaak. "And sir, *please* stay down. We didn't come this far for you to catch a stray."

"I didn't sit in a cell for three years to cower either," the Duros growled, but stayed hunched low. "Can you communicate with your ships in orbit?"

"No," admitted Asaak.

Thankfully Stazi didn't ask if they *had* ships in orbit, because none of them knew. This whole plan had been a giant leap of faith: Faith that Monia Gahan and Yalta Val had collated proper intel, faith that they could land and trek to the prison successfully, faith that the meager resistance fleet could overcome whatever reinforcements came from Bilbringi.

And in Kyra's case, it had required faith in the Force, faith that was starting to strain. She could only feel the chaos around her. Fighters on both sides were confused and desperate, soaked to their skins and disgustingly dirty. All of them wanted



it to end but none could lay down arms.

A new sound joined the tuneless cry of laserfire, one so quiet at first she could barely pick it out, but it grew louder until she knew it for what it was. A starship, propelled by roaring thrust engines, was tearing through the air and falling toward them.

Karrash heard it too. He threw his head back and released a triumphant roar. The laserfire flashing over them didn't relent; the enemy wasn't ready to give up yet. Crouching low, praying they could hold just a little longer, Kyra looked skyward and saw approaching thruster-glow. They swelled in size and the engine-roar grew louder, and finally a spotlight swept down from and washed circles over the prison yard.

Kyra knew exactly what to do. Without standing, she took out her lightsaber, ignited it, and held the white blade high. Karrash and Asaak did the same. Three beacons waved the shuttle in for landing.

The prison guards saw it too, and fire increased on them from three vectors. The crew of the assault shuttle saw it too, and the turret guns on its underside unleashed precise bursts of laserfire, taking out three enemy nests from above.

They held back from shooting further, lest they risk friendly fire, but that was enough. Kyra and the others lowered their lightsaber as the shuttle swooped low over them. Repulsor-jets kicked hot wind in their faces and the searchlight was glaringly bright. Kyra had to keep between fingers to see the landing ramp swing down. A pair of humans in old Alliance uniforms appeared, waving for them to come. Kyra's first thought, absurdly, was how *clean* they looked.

Stazi didn't hesitate. "With me!" he shouted and stood. Asaak and Karrash joined his charge, lightsabers blazing to protect his flanks, but the shuttle had done its job, clearing the most dangerous clusters of guards.

Kyra leaped up next and with a Force-propelled jump landed on the ramp. As one human pulled Stazi into the hold, she grabbed the other and said, "We have more out there!"

"Understood," the man said, and relayed the message to the pilot via comlink.

The shuttle rose five meters and began a slow pass around the yard, ducking low to scoop up clusters of rebels. They pulled Nellis and Alasett out of one mud pit, then recovered Neiro

from behind a crashed speeder. Selos and a few more were using a piece of the eastern gate as a shield, and as they climbed aboard the scattered guards mustered one last counter-attack. The Jenet took a laser bolt to the leg and barely made it up the ramp. Kyra deflected the spray as best she could with her lightsaber, and once they were all aboard the shuttle rose sharply again.

"Wait!" she shouted, "Ganner! Where's Ganner?"

The crewman looked at her, confused. The shuttle rose higher and more small arms fire pummeled its belly. They were making a run for it. Kyra tried to calm herself and find Ganner's presence. She scoured the muddy field below. She felt all the weary guards, defeated but glad this was over, though one sharp mind still raged. And she felt something else, familiar and faint.

"Ganner," she breathed, then slapped the crewman on the shoulder. "Ganner! Down there!"

The man looked reluctant; Kyra snatched his comlink away and yelled to the cockpit, "We've got one more! Just one more! He's behind that chunk of wall on the north side! Five meters west of the speeder!"

The shuttle kept rising, like it would run anyway, but then it dove. Kyra held tight to the landing strut and watched as the searchlight flashed in the spot where she'd directed. She saw two bodies there, both so covered in muck and mud as to be unrecognizable. Through the Force she knew only one was alive.

Before the shuttle even set down she leaped and landed in the muck. She reached down and pulled Ganner's body off of Lazaar's. He was wounded, unconscious; she could smell burned flesh but couldn't see where for the dirt and the dark. He was bigger than her but she had the Force, and clasping him around the waist she summoned its power and hurled them both onto the landing ramp. They hit the metal hard and rolled onto their sides together.

"Now!" she shouted to the crewman. "Take us up!"

He was happy to comply. The shuttle jumped skyward before the landing ramp even closed. At it lifted shut, spilling Kyra and Ganner fully into the hold, she spotted more engine-flares outside: Crossfires, protecting their wing.

Kyra felt good about that, but they weren't out of it yet. She untangled herself from Ganner, staggered to her feet, and made for the cockpit, trailing mud as she went, but the rescued rebels had dirtied the hold already. She got the cockpit in time to see them burn through the upper layers of atmosphere. When the stars became clear she was shocked to see the battle flashing around them. It wasn't just starfighters tangling up there, it was Mon Cal cruisers, big frigates, even a star destroyer. When the Federation had sent backup from Bilbringi, they hadn't used half-measures.

Gar Stazi, standing behind the pilot, said gravely, "All this, for me."

"That's right, Admiral," the Klatooinan pilot gave a toothy grin. "You have no idea how good it is to see you again, sir."

Stazi didn't smile. The elation of escape was wearing off, and the reminder of what he meant to people was settling heavily on him.

A few Crossfires flashed thrusters ahead of them, and Anj Dahl's voice crackled over the comm. "Shuttle, this is Rogue Leader. Do you have the package?"

"Package aboard," said the pilot, still smiling. "Do we have an exit vector?"

"Point oh-seven-eight looks clear. As soon as you get out of the gravity well, run."

Stazi leaned close to the comm. "Captain Dahl, we're almost clear. Tell the other ships to disengage and get out of here! Save as many people as you can!"

"Already on it, sir." It sounded like Anj was smiling too.

To Kyra's relief, they were steering well away from the battle zone. The rebels had effectively held off the Federation long enough to keep their exit vector clear. In less than two minutes, they'd veered fully away from the fight and had a clear view of the stars.

"Tell me we're clear of the gravity well," said Stazi.

"Absolutely," the pilot replied, and as though on cue, the group of Crossfires ahead stretched long and disappeared into hyperspace.

A split-second later they, too, joined the haven past light.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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When Saarai stepped into the *Jereveth Syne*'s command salon she found Captain Rand alone at the far side of the darkened chamber facing a half-circle of holographic figures. The man immediately spun on her. Alarm and anger flashed in his eyes but he said with admirable control, "This is a private conversation. Why are you here, Miss..."

"Leona Aress," she supplied, and added for the humans on the holo, "Personal aide to Senator Gahan."

"The senator has made her case, or *not* made it. You have no business here."

"The senator sent me to deliver a message, one that has to be off the record." That bit was a lie, but it had the power of truth behind it.

Rand gestured to the holos. "This is the governing council of Bavinyar holding official congress to decide our course of action. Their decision cannot be 'off the record.'"

"I understand, but the rationale can be confidential. Unless your government works radically differently from the one on Coruscant."

An older woman on one of the holos said, "Let's hear what she has to say."

"I don't like this," said another man. "We've already been too tangled up in Federation politics as it is."

"Then you deserve to know what's really going on here," said Saarai. As a Sith she'd been trained to lie well; now she'd see if she still had the skill.

A third councilor said, "Go ahead, young lady, but be quick."

Saarai folded hands in front of her and said, "As you probably suspect, Hogrum Chalk is here on a mission against his political enemies, specifically Senator Gahan. There is no rebel base on Bavinyar."

"Then why the exclusion zone?" asked the old woman.

"The Resettlement Authority threw it up for exactly the reasons they claimed. Potentially dangerous volcanic activity was discovered on the ocean floor and had to be cordoned off for further research."

"If they're researching," asked the skeptical man, "why haven't they provided us with data?"

"The Resettlement Authority *was* putting together information for Regent Chalk... until Chalk launched his expedition to Bavinyar before they got a chance to deliver it. In fact, he left Coruscant a good nine hours before the deadline he gave Senator Gahan to deliver to report. Your own Senator Jacovi can confirm that."

"Then what is the point of all this?" asked Rand. "If there's nothing in the exclusion zone except a volcano, why bring a fleet here?"

"Regent Chalk, best we can understand, plans to fire into the exclusion zone from orbit, triggering the eruption. We suspect he'll then use the ecological disaster as cover to forge evidence and link Senator Gahan and the Resettlement Committee with the rebel terrorists who attacked Galactic City. Senator Gahan has been a thorn in Chalk's side for many years and what you're seeing here is an elaborate deception to bring down her and her allies, perhaps even Senate Speaker Brighton."

"I knew it," the oldest councilor said. "Coruscant has turned our planet into pawns on its political dejarik board."

"Then where did those damned mercenaries come from?" scowled one man.

Time for the big plunge. "Purchased by Senator Gahan and her allies. Naturally, they want nothing to do with the rebel terrorists who attacked Galactic City and still harass the Federation. But something was required to prevent Chalk from carrying out his plan."

"If Senator Gahan is arrested, what becomes of the Resettlement Authority?" asked the old woman thoughtfully.

"It could be dissolved entirely," said another hopefully.

Saarai had to cut off that line of thinking. "More likely it would be reformed fully under Chalk's control. I know Cephalia has its problems with the refugees, but I promise, they will get far worse when you're dealing with Chalk directly. You already see how heavy-handed he can be."

"Yes, bringing a whole fleet is 'heavy handed,'" said Rand, "but inviting mercenaries into our space is hardly better."

"Agreed," said the oldest councilor. "This is not our problem. We should leave them to fight amongst themselves."

"That's as good as handing the senator and your world over to Chalk," Saarai insisted. "The mercenaries will fight against his fleet but they will lose. Then Chalk will attack your planet. He will fire on your oceans without your permission, which is far more than our mercenaries have done. He will savage your sovereignty, destroy people who could have been your allies, and hold your planet in a vise. Is that what you really want?"

After a moment the old woman said, "Your rhetoric is impressive, Miss Aress. You should consider getting into politics yourself."

"I think I already have," said Saarai, which drew a few reluctant smirks from the councilors.

Captain Rand, however, was quite serious. "You're asking us to intervene in a dispute between Federation political factions. Bavinyar has never wanted any part of that. All we've ever wanted is to be left alone."

"That time is over, Captain." She looked from him to the holos. "You want to be neutral in our fight? I understand that. You didn't ask for this crisis. But you cannot *be* neutral. You can either side- actively or passively- with the people who want to strafe turbolaser fire across your world and burn your oceans to steam, or with the people want to stop them. One group intends to harm Bavinyar. One doesn't. I'm not asking you to make a lofty moral choice for our benefit. I'm asking you do what a proud Bavinyari would do all along."

Her father had told her that the best way to get someone to do something was to convince them it was their idea in the first place. Porat had said something similar once, but she wondered if she'd come off too strong here. The councilors exchanged looks and Rand's expression wilted from indignant to thoughtful.

Saarai tried for one last push. “You didn’t ask to be placed on the cusp of history, but here you are. You’re not just passive observers in this. You can make a choice. You can stand up for your home. That’s all we ask you to do.”

After a long, tense moment, the old woman said, “Thank you, Miss Aress. Please leave now, so we may consider.”

Rand tilted his head toward the exit. Saara knew not to argue. She snapped a deep respectful bow and said, “Thank you for your consideration, Councilors. I know you’ll make the correct choice for us all.”

And then she stepped out of the chamber, back onto the bridge, and wondered whether her own choice had been the right one.

Cade set *Mynock* down on one of the refugee settlement’s floating docks just as the sky was clearing and late-afternoon sunlight fell on the rain-wet platforms. Because he had no idea what they were getting themselves into- only that it was a big mess- he told Jariah and Deliah to stay on *Mynock* and keep it ready for a quick take-off, then hurried across the gleaming puddles to Ania’s ship.

When he clambered up *Free Agent*’s ramp and into its hold, Cade found it packed with familiar faces. There was Marin, on her feet, with AG-37 behind her like a stretched metal shadow. Nei Rin sat at a table across from Azlyn. K’Kruhk and Rasi Tuum’s bulky bodies filled another corner. Khat Lah claimed a chair of his own. His eyes even marked Marasiah, standing with her back to the wall, and Darth Talon facing her from the opposite side. Cade felt like somebody late to his own surprise party.

“Gang’s all here,” he observed, then corrected himself. “Almost, anyway. Where’s Ania and her Imp?”

“Coruscant,” Marin said, but Cade heard doubt in her voice.

Before he could ask, Khat Lah said, “I am glad that you have come, Cade Skywalker, but I believe there is little for you to do here.”

“Stang, I run a blockade to be here and this is the welcome I get?” He planted hands on his hips. “You do know they’ve got a fleet up there, right? As in the damned Regent?”

“Are you certain my uncle is here?” asked Marasiah.

"I had a little chat with my half-sister on the way down. It sounds like he's on the *Jagged Fel*."

She blinked twice at the name of her old flagship. "Did you recognize any other vessels?"

"Well, if Gunner was out there she was probably with her daddy's ship, *War Hammer*."

"Rulf Yage is an honorable man. I find it hard to believe he'd consent to all this if he knew what was going on."

"He probably doesn't know," Cade said.

Before he could suggest the rest, Talon did it for him. "You could hail *War Hammer* and tell him yourself."

For a tense moment all eyes went to Marasiah, who dropped hers to the floor. Then Azlyn muttered, "The Federation ships have a jamming field up, and they're refusing all hails from the surface."

"Well that's damned inconvenient," Cade said, though for Marasiah it seemed the opposite. "Listen, what about the Tho Yor? Why are we all sitting here with hell over our heads when we could be doing what we came here for?"

"We've already talked to the Tho Yor," said Marin. "It was... uncooperative."

"Tasha Ryo insisted there was nothing she could do to help us recover the Force," said Khat Lah. "No planets to seek out. No gateways to build."

That explained the looks of crushing defeat. It seemed Cade really had run that blockade for nothing, and he felt the weight of three wasted years coming down on him. But if the Tho Yor was useless then, cruel as it was, there was no reason for them to stay and be crushed by Chalk's fleet. Cade was trying to figure out how to say it delicately when Khat Lah spoke again.

"When I spoke with," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "I made the best argument I could. I believe... I *hope* she will consider my offer and approve. That choice is in her hands now."

"What kind of offer are you talking about?" asked Cade.

But Khat Lah looked away, like he didn't want to answer. Damn cryptic to the last. "It may come to nothing," he said. "We shall see. Our fate is not ours to command."

Cade hated being out of control. "Listen, if you think it's worth it to go out there again, I can try to talk to her. I'm a karking Skywalker."



“So am I,” said Marin, voice dry. “I think if she’ll listen to anyone, it will be Khat Lah.”

If she was listening to anyone, Cade thought, Tasha would have done something by now. The ancient Je’daii inside the Tho Yor existed outside of space and time as Cade experienced it, and if she made a choice she could do it in less than a real-time instant. If she was still stuck in the ocean floor, it meant she wanted to be there, and Khat Lah’s attempted negotiations-whatever those entailed- had failed.

He was about to suggest escaping again when boots clapped the deck behind him. Cade turned to see the Mon Calamari mechanic, Sauk, came through *Free Agent*’s main hallway. The sight of Cade froze him in surprise, but only for a second.

Looking across the group Sauk said, “We’re getting new readings from orbit. The fighting’s started.”

The first flares of combat weren’t exploding starships or bursting warheads but the scatter of emerald laserfire against the shields of a mercenary corvette. As soon as they landed the corvette returned fire, and the squadron of old Tri-wing interceptors from the carrier veered to counterattack. Per orders the TIE Predators began to fall back toward *Silencer*, but the Tri-wings were faster, and one unlucky TIE burst into a fireball to mark the commencement of battle.

Standing on the frigate’s bridge, Eli could just spot the distant explosion with his naked eye. It dwindled quickly but the Tri-wings kept chasing the TIEs, and he turned to Captain Morrabin to say, “Pull forward and prepare all guns for anti-starfighter operations. We’re protecting our TIEs.”

The Givin hesitated for a second, just as he’d hesitated to order the TIEs to attack the corvette in the first place, but then he did as commanded.

The moment the Bavinyar Defense Force announced it was standing beside the mercenaries and refusing the Federation access to its surface, Eli knew what had to be done. Before the standoff could intensify he’d broken it. A glance at the tactical holo warmed his heart: *War Hammer* was launching a full wing of TIEs and its two support frigates were pulling ahead to engage the mercenaries in ship-to-ship combat.

*Silencer* was pulling ahead too. The planet filled the bridge’s

viewport and they drew close enough that Eli could make out individual capital ships against the ocean-blue face. Explosions grew more frequent as the mercenaries' fighters clashed with the TIEs, and *Silencer's* own squadron flashed past the hull, dragging a trail of chasing Tri-wings. The frigate's guns were precise and accurate, and three of the old fighters burst in front of Eli's eyes, their debris scattering harmlessly against his ship's shields.

The real test, though, was whether the BDF would really join in the fight. Another look at the tactical holo told him the ships were still keeping position and holding fire, but the growing battle with Black Spear Company would envelope them soon.

The question was whether to push or let them be. Firing directly on them, as he had with the mercenaries, would likely draw them in. Eli decided on a different tack here.

"Captain," he told Morrabin, "Bring us ahead. Keep weapons trained on the mercenary ships but put us within firing range of the BDF."

The Givin froze. Morrabin was used to taking Eli's unliteral orders but turning his frigate into bait may have been one step too far.

"I have no intention of risking this ship," Eli said. "We're just testing their mettle. Expose one flank and raise shields to full. Keep all cannons pointed at Black Spear targets only. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Morrabin's voice was ragged but he turned to relay the order to helm.

At the same time, an officer from the comm station told Eli, "Sir, we have a priority hail from the *Jagged Fel*. They want to speak to you, personally."

That would be Chalk, no doubt, scolding him for his impetuosity. Eli didn't have time for that. They were partners in this and Chalk was not his master. He had no master, not even the Force, so he said, "Tell *Jagged Fel* I'm busy and will return the call when possible."

The lieutenant frowned but said, "Understood, sir."

As ordered, *Silencer* pulled ahead. The TIEs formed on its starboard flank to guard against mercenary attacks while the frigate pulled ahead and turned its port side toward the nearest

BDF corvette. At the same time a Black Spear gunship moved ahead to engage them head-on. Missiles and turbolaser volleys arced between the two ships, lighting up their forward shields. Though *Silencer's* bridge was on the rear of the ship Eli still felt tremors through the deck, the first of the battle. The mercenary gunship packed a strong punch for its size but *Silencer* had superior armaments, and if the smaller ship continued the engagement it would lose.

Eli watched the tactical readouts and felt a thrill as the mercenary ship's shields were worn down to the breaking point. And then the lieutenant announced that *Silencer* was taking fire against its port shields. His whole chest tightened; mettle tested, bait taken.

"The BDF ship is firing on us," Morrabin explained unnecessarily. "This is no good, sir. We might break the gunship, but the corvette can punch our shields where they're weak."

The Givin's black eyes bored into Eli, imploring. Scowling, he said, "Fall back. Have the TIEs cover us if we need it."

Relieved, Morrabin gave the order. *Silencer* spun its nose away from the gunship and accelerated back toward the Federation line, a full retreat. For a moment it looked like the battered mercenary ship would give chase, but instead it held position. The BDF corvette spewed laserfire against *Silencer's* aft shields but made no move to pursue.

As they retreated from the firing line, Eli looked at the tactical holo. Admiral Yage's two frigates were fully engaged with the mercenaries now, and it looked like he was going to try and drive *War Hammer* through the heart of their formation. At the same time, the BDF ships were on the move, folding in on the frigates from their flanks and opening fire.

The Bavinyari's reckless bravery surprised impressed Eli, but he'd have much rather seen them hold on the sides. The combined BDF and Black Spear forces still didn't have the firepower to hold back the Federation, but this was doomed to be harder than he'd hoped.

It was everything Hogrum had been hoping to avoid. In a matter of minutes the standoff had become a skirmish, which in turn exploded to full conflagration. The space over the target

zone was aglow with explosions; not only had Black Spear Company held position but the Bavinyar Defense Force, through some logic Hogrum couldn't fathom, had decided to throw its lot in with the mercenaries against the Federation, their own government.

That made them all enemies and all legitimate targets but explaining this to the senate would be difficult. At least Monia Gahan had shown her true colors; if she survived the battle he'd have no problem locking her away with Stazi, Kaige, and Nelloran.

But the real author of this mess wasn't Gahan, but Eli Horn. He'd always known the young man might disobey orders at some point, but he'd failed to consider that he might act now, at the worst possible time. Not only had he charged the Black Spear ships, he'd baited the BDF into fully joining the battle, then run back to the shelter of the Federation line. And all the while he'd refused to answer Hogrum's hails.

He'd pay for all of that, but not yet. Once the Tho Yor was atomized in its ocean-floor berth, once Marasiah, Marin Fel, Cade Skywalker, Khat Lah and Darth Talon were all accounted for, there would be no need of Eli either.

Whole body still tense with anger, Hogrum watched from the *Jagged Fel's* bridge as the battle continued. Two of Yage's frigates led the charge but the BDF ships came at them from the flank while their shields were already loaded with Black Spear's laserfire from the front. As Hogrum watched on the tactical display, a group of bold mercenary bombers swept in on one frigate from its unshielded side and dropped massive payloads on its command section. With a horrible flash the bridge tower disintegrated, its shields shuddered and died, and the ship began to drift in space.

It didn't end there. The mercenaries and Bavinyari, with impressive coordination, managed to use the dying ship's bulk as cover to attack the other frigate. Starfighters and bombers made fast sorties, swarming the second ship then retreating behind the body of the first. TIEs that pursued were picked off by a Black Spear gunship hanging well out of the range of the frigate's batteries. At the same time the frigate was overwhelmed by the combined enemy. It started to pull back toward its own line, only to suffer another deadly bomber run that

collapsed its forward shields and ignited its dorsal missile batteries. That ship, too, sputtered as the mercenaries and Bavinyari continued to tear at its body with constant laserfire.

Grim silence had settled over the *Jagged Fel*'s bridge. For this battle to have happened at all was an embarrassment; to lose it would be a disgrace. The Federation still had four stars destroyers plus support craft, more than enough to blast through the combined BDF and mercenary ships, but the attack would be costly and worse, it would buy time for Marasiah and the other Skywalkers to act on the Tho Yor. As he watched the tactical holo Hogrum saw the BDF was using tractor beams to tug the two crippled frigates into steady position over the combat zone, effectively turning them into living shields.

That comm officer, sounding more nervous than ever, said, "Regent, sir, Admiral Yage is requesting instruction."

Hogrum allowed a frustrated sigh. He'd let Eli Horn to drag him into this fight and that was a mistake. Even worse would be letting it continue to its bloody conclusion. He was not an admiral and not a soldier. Hogrum excelled when commanding weapons more subtle than turbolasers.

He said, "Tell Yage to hold. Patch me a new line with the leader of Black Spear Company."

"One minute, sir."

Hogrum let the plan form in his mind. He should have attempted this from the start. Instead he'd allowed the situation to spiral out of control. Maybe he could reign it back in and salvage it yet.

"We have an open line, sir," the comm lieutenant reported.

"Do you have her location?"

"It seems to be coming from the carrier, sir, but like I said before, it could be relayed."

Hogrum doubted it this time. A Mandalorian by birth, exiled through no fault of her own, Sora Auchs would be with her fleet for the fighting, if only to prove to herself she was still brave. He stepped up to the console to see the woman's familiar face, young but harsh, replicated in flickering holo.

"Begging for mercy, Regent?" She had a cocky grin but an anxious tremor in her voice.

"Hardly. The engagement was started by a rogue officer, without my authorization."

"Well that's too bad for you, but you can't stop this kind of fight once it's started."

"Yes, you can. *You*, specifically, are going to help by opening a connection with your client on the surface. Otherwise you are going to lose, and many more of your soldiers are going to die for no reason." Auchs hesitated, top teeth biting lower lip. Hogrum said, "I know how mercenaries work. You surely have a point person on the ground. Either tell me how to contact them or set your transponder to act as a relay. Either way, I need to speak with them."

She considered. "That may take a minute to set up."

"Good. I have preparation of my own to do. Hail me again when you can give a direct link with our client."

He stabbed the button himself and killed the signal, stopping any argument before it started. More confident now, he picked his head up and called to his personal security officer. "Lieutenant Nexel, go down to the brig and retrieve the prisoner. Bring her to Captain Worgaan's salon. Do it now."

"Yes, sir," the stormtrooper said, and taking three of his subordinates hurried off the bridge.

Hogrum looked around the deck. It seemed like everyone was watching him but as he turned toward them they all looked away. Everyone except Astraal.

"Regent, sir," the Twi'lek said, "Are you trying to negotiate an end to the fight?"

"Yes. It never should have started."

Relieved, she glanced out the viewport at the laser-flash and explosions. "Do you think we can start a cease-fire now, just as a preliminary? If you told Admiral Yage to, he could--"

"No. Let it rage for a little more." He glanced at the battle. "That way there will be no mistaking the stakes when I negotiate."

"I... understand, sir." Her disappointment was plain. She was soft at the core, weak like her Jedi brother. Just as he thought he should have left her on Coruscant she added, "We've also received a hail from Senator Eldon, sir. He's asking about the situation here."

Eldon was the unofficial leader of the senator's pro-Imperial faction, probably looking for the best way to spin this. Hogrum would have given it to him, but he had bigger concerns. "Tell

Eldon we appreciate his efforts and I'll get back to him once this is settled. And Miss Vao, you're to stay at your post. Stave off any more inquiries from Coruscant. Do not interrupt me in the captain's room under any circumstances. Is that clear?"

Astraal nodded timidly and turned back to her console. Hogrum was glad to have that settled without argument so he could turn his attention where it belonged. A woman as soft as her would have no stomach for what was about to come.

There wasn't room in *Free Agent's* cockpit for everyone to watch readouts of the battle taking place in orbit, but Marin had quickly claimed her spot in the co-pilot's station to follow every bit of it. She'd been surprised when the Federation had started its attack and shocked when the Bavinyar Defense Force joined with Sora Auchs to prevent the frigates, TIEs, and star destroyers from reaching the planet. It seemed that the Bavinyari's prickly defensiveness had played in their favor.

All the while she'd waited anxiously for any sign the Tho Yor was awakening but nothing came, not from the Force and not from sensor buoys they'd placed on the ocean above it. It seemed that Tasha Ryo had refused their pleas, which made the valiant stand in orbit pointless.

And then AG-37, strapped in his pilot's seat like he was ready for liftoff, reported, "We are receiving a hail from the Black Spear command ship."

Sora, then. She and Marin had parted on cool but civil terms, which was frankly all she could hope for. The Force had been frustratingly unhelpful when trying to figure out the younger woman's motivations, and Marin was surprised she'd stood so firm in the face of a larger Imperial force.

As soon as Sora's face appeared on the holo projector, Marin said, "Thank you, Commander Auchs. You've been putting up a brave stand and you've been well worth the money."

"Good," said Sora curtly. "I can't build up my company's reputation by running from fights."

Marin hadn't expected Sora to be fighting this battle for a nobler reason; the fact that she was so honest about it brought a wry smile to her lips.

"I'll make sure to recommend you if we get out of this," she said.

"I'm not calling for pleasantries. I've just received a request from Hogrum Chalk himself. It sounds like he wants to parlay."

Behind Marin, out of range of the holo-transceiver, Cade muttered, "Bastard bit off more than he can chew."

In an even lower voice Marasiah said, "He can still chew us all up. Don't doubt it."

Ignoring them, Marin told Sora, "If he wants to talk, I'm willing."

"Good. I'll relay the transmission shortly."

Sora's image disappeared and Marin looked to the beings currently crowded behind her: Cade and Marasiah, Khat Lah, Talon and K'Kruhk. It was quite a gathering. If the regent knew everybody they had crammed in here he'd try all the harder to vaporize them,

She said, "You'd better clear out and make sure you're not in viewing range. I don't want to tell Chalk anything I don't have to."

"What do you expect to gain from negotiation?" asked K'Kruhk.

"You mean besides time?" She glanced at Khat Lah, who still wouldn't explain what he'd told Tasha Ryo or what help might be coming. "I don't know. I might be able to sound him out and find how much he knows. I figure he never planned on this turning into a full-blown battle, since he'll have hell to pay for it back on Coruscant. He's probably trying to defuse this."

"Little late for that," said Cade. "I think we—"

He was cut off by a chime from the comm. Marin made a shooing motion. "Get back, into the hall, all of you. Go."

The five of them packed into *Free Agent's* main corridor, where the others passengers were already crammed. With just herself and the co-pilot's spot and AG-37 at the controls, Marin took a deep breath, braced herself, and opened the transmission.

By now everybody in the galaxy knew what Hogrum Chalk looked like: black cape, scarred face half-covered in metal. There was something about his sole working eye that many considered hard, but to Marin looked sad, maybe because she could still remember, very faintly, what he'd been when they'd first met: a young Hapan refugee, not yet scarred but confused and frightened, shadowing his big sister for comfort.



To her surprise, Chalk recognized her as well. "Marin Fel," he said. "It has been... an extremely long time."

She stared at that hard holographic face until she found something to say. "I haven't gone by that name in almost as long. Right now, call me... Marin Solo."

"Ah. Well, that is timely." Without explaining that, he continued, "Am I to understand that you're the leader of this operation? That you hired a band of mercenaries to protect the Tho Yor at the bottom of the sea?"

"Sora Auchs and I have a history," she said. She wasn't going to elaborate or mention how the rebels had pitched in the credits. Hopefully Chalk drew the wrong conclusions.

"I know you're a descendant of Skywalker, and therefore have the Force. You should have made contact with the Tho Yor by now, yet we see no sign of it. Would you care to explain?"

"No. I wouldn't." And she couldn't if she wanted to.

"You should already know that this standoff is pointless. The object you've quested after for three years has given you nothing. Right now, thousands of beings are dying to protect an object of no value. *You* are wasting their lives, Miss Solo, not me. I'm giving you a chance to call your mercenaries and order them to stand down. I will be even more generous and allow you time to withdraw from the planet before we initiate orbital bombardment."

Marin could almost hear Marasiah in her ear, telling her not to believe anything Chalk said. "The BDF might not react kindly to you bombing their planet, judging by how they're acting now."

"The Bavinyari can always be beaten into submission."

"Oh, you mean like Palpatine did?"

"I won't let you derail the conversation. Do the right thing, Miss Solo. End this pointless death now."

Marin looked at that stern face and saw no hint of mercy. Yet even if she had, she realized she'd have turned him down anyway. The Tho Yor was their last chance at recovering the Force. It was her best hope of understanding the power that had governed her whole long, strange life. If she left it to be obliterated, there'd be nothing left to live for.

And, through the Force, she felt that those clustered in the

hall behind her- Yuuzhan Vong, ex-Jedi, ex-Sith and even ex-empress- all felt the same.

"I'm sorry," Marin said. "I can't do that."

"I expected so much." Chalk gave a tiny shrug. "Fortunately, I was prepared."

He took two steps back, allowing the holo to show him from the waist-up. His body bent out of the view-field, then came back with a woman a head shorter than him, smaller and thinner, hands bound behind her back and long dark hair pulled into a ponytail Chalk used to drag the rest of her into view.

Marin's breath stopped as Chalk jerked her daughter's head up, revealing Ania's bruised face.

Staring right at the holo transmitter, the regent said, "I have your mother on the line, Miss Solo. Can you see her?"

Ania's eyes fluttered. When she spoke her voice was slurred, like she'd been drugged. "Mom? Is that... you?"

Marin couldn't even speak. In the past hours' chaos she'd thought she'd imagined every possibility, but she'd never thought of this.

"Say something else to her," Chalk commanded. "Tell her to order her mercenaries to withdraw this instant, or I will snap your neck."

"Stop." Marin's voice was so weak even she could barely hear it.

"Do it, girl." Chalk yanked Ania's hair so hard she yelped. "At least give your mother some last words to remember you by."

Ania tried to balance on shaky legs. Her eyes met her mother's through the holos and her mouth flexed to speak, but no sound came. She seemed as paralyzed by fear as Marin, but then she twisted her head toward Chalk, twisted her face to a sneer, and said, "I hope you rot in every hell, you *shabla chak'aar*."

In a flash Chalk released his grip on her hair and switched it to her throat. Ania gasped and writhed as his strong one-handed grip lifted her by the neck, picking her off her feet. Her hands were still bound at her back and she tried to kick for him but Chalk's reach was too long; all she did was flail his cape.

And Marin still couldn't speak or move. All she could do was watch her daughter die.

“Enough!” A voice boomed behind her. “Stop this! Now!”

Lowering Ania so her toes touched the ground but not releasing her, Chalk stared at Marasiah as she appeared over her aunt’s shoulder.

“Let Ania go,” the woman said, with all the authority of an empress, “or everyone on and over Bavinyar will know that I am here, and what you’ve done.”

Chalk was gratifyingly speechless, but only for a moment. “I’ve instructed every Federation ship to ignore hails from the planet.”

“Then the Bavinyari will hear, and Auch’s mercenaries. And *they* will tell the rest of the galaxy exactly what you are.”

He glared murder at her. “What do you want in return?”

“Release Ania.”

“In exchange for what? I came here for the Tho Yor, not you.”

“And now you have both. That object in the ocean is a dead thing. We tried to communicate with it, but we failed.”

“You can’t expect me to take your word on that.”

“No. You can see for yourself. *I* can prove it to you.” Marasiah held out both hands, wrists pointed up as though offering them for shackles. Her voice cracked as she said, “Let Ania go, Uncle, and I’ll surrender. You can put me back in prison and on my word, I swear I will never leave it.”

His fingers dug into the muscle of Ania Solo’s neck and her windpipe strained hard against his palm. It would take just a small squeeze to crush them. After so many frustrations he wanted to crush *something*, but Hogrum stayed his hand when he saw Marasiah in the holo-field. At first glance he barely recognized her; the regal white streak in her hair was gone, replaced with curtains of messy brown. Her face was drawn, her eyes dark. She’d lost her pride and so much more.

When he heard what she had to say, he was instantly skeptical. “You’d give up your freedom for this woman? This nothing?”

“She is family, Uncle. That meant something to you once.”

It still did. He found himself relieved by her offer; it meant he had a chance of capturing instead of killing Elliah’s child. A smaller stain on his conscience. The question was whether he

could afford that balm when the stakes were so high.

"Do you expect me to trust your offer?" he asked.

"No. But for what I'm offering there's little choice. I noticed there's a small island chain in the southeast corner of the exclusion zone. We can meet there for the exchange."

He found he couldn't say no. "I will send a team with the prisoner."

"And yourself, Uncle. I won't surrender unless I see you there."

That meant it was likely a trap. He stared at his niece, and at Marin's shell-shocked face beneath. "Miss Solo," he said, "Order your mercenaries to stand down. The BDF also. My people will honor the ceasefire."

Marin swallowed, coming back to herself. "I won't make them withdraw."

"And I won't withdraw mine. This is a prisoner exchange, not a surrender." He tightened his grip on Ania's throat, just enough to make her choke. "Your soldiers will let me pass and you will not bring any mercenaries to the exchange."

The old woman's face tightened. "If you're bringing troops, so will we."

"Fine. I will allow you to bring two small shuttles, no more."

"Three."

"No. Two and only two ships. I will bring the same."

Reluctantly, face still pinched, Marin nodded.

"Then we have a deal." Chalk released Ania Solo entirely. Gasping and retching, the woman collapsed to her knees, head bowed, hands still tied at her back. To the holo he said, "You surprise me, Sia. A woman raised to be empress, giving herself up for scum like this."

Marasiah shook her head. "I am *tired*, Uncle. Tired of running. Tired of ruling or trying to rule. I just want it to *stop*. I could have announced myself to the galaxy at any time for three years, but I didn't, because it would do more harm than good. *I* do more harm. So I'm giving myself back to you. This way, everyone wins."

Her words rang with bitter truth. She was a broken woman and it was all his doing. That gave him no pride.

"Agreed," Hogrum said. "I will come down with the prisoner one hour after a complete cease-fire."

“Then I’ll give Sora the order now,” said Marin. “Anything else?”

“Not at this time.” Hogrum looked down at Ania. “You’ll see your daughter shortly. I’m a man of my word.”

“If you’re not, Chalk, I will kill you.”

He could tell she believed what she said. Hogrum gave her a tiny nod, then killed the transmission.

Leaving Ania Solo on the floor of Captain Worgaan’s office, he went to the door and summoned Lieutenant Nexel. After ordering the man and his stormtroopers to prepare the prison for transport to the surface, he walked back onto the bridge and quickly commanded a ceasefire.

Within thirty seconds, the explosions over Bavinyar started dying down. Within two minutes, not a single cannon flashed in the vacuum, though debris still drifted in slow orbit. The *Jagged Fel*’s crew sank into collective relief and many of them stared at Hogrum with gratitude bordering worship.

“This is merely a ceasefire,” he reminded them, “And it may break at any time. Keep on red alert and stay vigilant while I negotiate a permanent solution.”

That only increased their gratitude. A few young officers even clapped. Hogrum didn’t get to bask in appreciation very often and he savored it briefly, though when he turned his eyes to Astraal, his aide averted her own.

“You should be happy, Miss Vao,” he told her. “We may end this without any more bloodshed.”

“I hope so, sir. I really do.”

But there was still a great hurdle. Chalk went to the main comm station and told the jittery lieutenant, “Hail *Silencer* again, maximum priority.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said. “We’ll see if he answers this time, won’t we sir?”

Hogrum didn’t dignify that with a response. He merely waited until the holo-image of Eli Horn appeared. He stood with shoulders squared and chin lifted. He was trying to look defiant but to Hogrum’s eyes the young man seemed petulant.

“As you can see, I’ve orchestrated a halt to the skirmish you started.”

“The skirmish was going to happen anyway. I got it started to keep them on edge,” Eli said, unbowed.

“You pulled the BDF into this fight also.”

“I forced them to play their hand early.”

“And it still cost us two frigates,” Hogrum snarled. “But we will deal your discipline later. I’ve spoken with the leader of the rebels on the surface.”

Eli took his meaning. His expression softened to curiosity. “I take it that’s why fighting has stopped.”

“Yes. I called for the cease-fire to allow a parlay on an island chain in the southeast corner of the exclusion zone.”

He nodded. “I’ve studied the charts. They’re the *only* islands in the exclusion zone.”

“Then you should have no problem finding them. Take your best troops, load them on a shuttle from *Silencer*, and meet me there in one hour.”

“You sir?”

“Yes, me. We are going to be doing a prisoner exchange. I will be handing ours over personally. And I will need your skills to guarantee we secure theirs.”

Eli didn’t understand all of it, but he understood enough. As for the rest, let him guess. Ignorance might prevent him from getting rash and fouling up this stage of the mission too.

“Will this exchange help our ultimate objective, sir?”

“According to the rebel leaders, that ‘objective’ is of no use to either of us. Not that I trust their word.”

“I look forward to investigating myself, sir.”

It was less a show of eagerness and more a non-subtle reminder that Hogrum still needed Eli’s Force powers. He looked forward to the day he didn’t and could put the errant young man in an ysalamiri-shielded prison alongside Marasiah, Marin, and whoever else he managed to seize today.

As he shut off the connection with *Silencer*, Hogrum brought out his personal comm to remind Lieutenant Nexel to bring one of the Force-blocking creatures with the prisoner. He’d brought them without expecting to need them but was glad for it now.

With stakes so high, no caution could be spared.

## Chapter Thirty

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After so long in captivity, Gar Stazi was astonished by liberty. Once he was transferred to the resistance carrier *Paramount*—itself a warship decades past its prime, but the best they had— he was surrounded by people all begging for attention. Some beings he knew well, like Ekorian, Sukharr, and Anj Dahl. Others, like the Jedi who'd rescued him, were half-remembered. Many were strangers but still looked on him like they'd known him all their lives.

The human girl who'd led his rescue from Selvaris stood out among them. Her name was Kyra— just Kyra— and somehow she alone could use the Force.

That baffled Stazi, but he'd gotten no explanation since the frenzied escape from the prison. Along with all the others the first thing he needed was a shower to wash away Selvaris's muck. The ship's captain, an unremembered human named Starets, escorted him to a spacious cabin that might have been held in reserve for him, and once he had cleaned himself Stazi stepped out to discover a Galactic Alliance uniform waiting for him. Most of these rebels wore such clothes, advertising their partisan allegiance, and somehow they'd found an outfit that matched Stazi's measurements perfectly.

Despite everything, it felt good being back in uniform again.

When he stepped out into the hallway he found that curious human waiting for him. She was clean from head to toe this time and wore a dark jumpsuit rather than an Alliance uniform. The lightsaber at her belt drew instant attention.

Instead of recognizing that she saluted. "It's good to have you

aboard, sir. I'm to escort you to your briefing. I think it's going to be a long one."

"I imagine it will," agreed Stazi. "Did you volunteer to be my escort?"

"I did," she admitted, slightly abashed and suddenly almost young. "Please walk with me, sir."

She led him down long hallways. While its crew kept it clean, Stazi's eyes marked rust-stains along the bulkhead seams and subtle warping in some metal plates. If this was the best the resistance had, he despaired for them.

Kyra outlined briefly the state of the galaxy. Hogrump Chalk still reigned supreme on Coruscant, with the Alliance-led senate cowed to submission. The military was in the grip of Imperial admirals, though the Alliance's Slossar still commanded a fleet in the Outer Rim, which had been mopping up remnants of the Ssi-Ruuk and Nagai for the past three years. It was clear Chalk wanted them far from the Core. Kyra also explained the lengths they'd gone to rescue him, including the abortive attempt on Praxal VII of which he already knew. She also said that, barring a few exceptions, the Force remained silent across the galaxy.

"I notice you are one of those exceptions," he said. "Are you a long-lost part of the Skywalker line?"

"No, sir."

"Then how can you use the Force?"

"We're almost at the conference room, sir, and there's not enough time to tell the story. The Jedi are still looking for a way to get it back themselves, but they haven't had any success." Her voice became resigned. "I think the way it is now is the way it will stay."

"Were you one of my soldiers during the war?" She looked too young for that, but he was no expert on human ages.

"No, sir."

"Then why are you fighting with us? Not that I don't appreciate the help."

The guarded conference hall doors loomed ahead, but she stopped in the middle of the hall to face him. "I have a power almost nobody else does. That means I have the responsibility to use it for good. This *is* the good fight, sir. It doesn't have the best chance of success, as you're about to fight out. But it's the



right thing to do, and I'm standing by it." Looking suddenly very old, Kyra added, "I lost my whole family in the last war, sir. I want to make sure people can live in a real peace. A *just* peace."

Her voice cracked as she said it. This stranger had poured a bit of her heart out to him. Stazi reciprocated the only way he could, with a light touch and confident word. "I appreciate what you've done here. And I swear I'll try to honor everyone you lost rescuing me."

"I'm glad, sir."

He removed his hand from her shoulder, turned, and faced the conference room doors. "Well, let's get the long briefing start, shall we?"

When they walked through the doors they found themselves in a room with Sukharr, Ekorian, Anj Dahl, and a few of those half-familiar beings. The Trandosha and the Drall did most of the talking, first explaining to Stazi the layout and position of their fleets, followed by a summary of financial resources and supplies available.

He'd known theirs was a desperate operation, but the sum total was still depressing. Stazi tried to keep disappointment from his face. He knew very well how much all these beings were depending on him to summon a miracle. After years of isolation in which only his own worried mattered, the weight was frankly suffocating.

"What about the situation on Coruscant?" he asked. "Do we have any allies among the senate?"

"It's been very risky to reach out to them," Ekorian cautioned. "You know Chalk is a master at intelligence-gathering. He's watching all his political enemies."

"So we have no one in Senator Brighton's office? No one in Slossar's fleet either?"

"Slossar's people have been passing us low-level intelligence for a while, but we've had to rely on other sources for critical intel, including your location, sir."

"We got that one courtesy of Senator Gahan," Anj Dahl put in, a little smile graced her face at mention of the ex-Rogue.

Stazi was relieved *some* of his old allies still remained on Coruscant. As a military force, the resistance movement had no hope of victory. The only hope was discrediting Chalk and

retaking the government from within.

"Monia is a new asset," Anj said, "But she helped find your location, sir, with help from an Imperial Knight, Yalta Val."

"I know him. Does Chalk realize Val has turned against him?"

Anj's smile wavered. "This is where it gets complicated. While we were rescuing you, other things were going down. In fact, I think they're still going down. That's why we're on our way to Bavinyar."

"Bavinyar? What's happening there?"

Stazi saw Kyra stiffen in curiosity. This was news to her too.

After a go-ahead nod from Ekorian, Anj plunged in to explain it all. She talked about the emergency call they'd gotten from Saara Derrol, and how a stand-off was even now holding over the ocean world. From the latest intelligence it sounded like a mess, with a Federation fleet commanded by Chalk himself standing off against an unlikely alliance of resistance-bought mercenaries and the local Bavinyari defense fleet. Apparently Monia herself- with Saara, Yalta Val, and another ex-Imperial Knight in tow- had gone to the planet as well.

"But *why*?" pressed Stazi. "What in the blazes is so important about Bavinyar? How could refugee settlement rouse up all this?"

"It's not about the refugees," said Anj. "It's about the Jedi, and what they found in the ocean there."

"What did they find?" Kyra asked urgently. "Did Jao explain? Did he give it a name?"

"He did..." Anj trailed off, trying to remember. "I think the word he used was... 'Tho Yor.'"

The younger woman's jaw dropped. After a moment of shock she swiveled on Stazi. "Sir, that thing can be our link to regaining the Force. We *have* to protect it."

"We've already purchased services from Black Spear Company, at considerable cost," Ekorian said edgily. "And our forces are still recovering from the battle at Selvaris."

"Our losses were minimal. You said it yourself," Kyra said. "Why would we be heading to Bavinyar if we weren't going to reinforce Black Spear?"

"We've started in that direction because it is a long trip, and in case Admiral Stazi *did* want to intervene. And because

General Sukharr supports intervention.” The Drall gave a tiny sigh. “However, I’m skeptical it would be worth the cost of a full engagement. Our sources tell us Stazi brought a task force commanded by Rulf Yage. That’s one of his best admirals.”

“We have to help!” Kyra pounded the table, making Anj jump. “Chalk and Eli will stop at nothing to destroy that Tho Yor. They’ll commit a whole fleet. They’ll burn the planet. That’s how badly they want the Force to stay dead.”

Stazi didn’t get a chance to ask who this ‘Eli’ was. Sukharr growled, “The stand-off is ongoing. Our sources suggest a ceasefire, but we are over a standard day away from Bavinyar. There’s no telling what the situation will be when we arrive.”

Eyes turned to Stazi, offering him his first decision. He understood so little, and they were asking for so much.

He’d never loved the Jedi. They operated on different rules than the military, and when he was honest, he admitted that the Duros part of him resented them for the Ossus Project. Even if the Sith done the sabotage, it had been Jedi hubris that had ruined his homeworld and ninety-nine others.

But he’d been placed command of a navy that was fighting a war it could not win. To have any success against Chalk they needed to look at unconventional methods. For Chalk, no military man, to have gone to Bavinyar himself proved this Tho Yor, whatever it was, scared the regent to the core.

And that reason alone was enough to decide him.

“Continue on course to Bavinyar,” Stazi told them. “I want a situation room set up where we can monitor live feeds from the planet. I need to be able to adapt my strategy minute-by-minute. If you can firm up a connection with Senator Gahan, all the better.”

Sukharr didn’t hesitate. The general sprung from his seat to get things started. Others stirred to motion. After so long sitting and listening Stazi rose to his feet, stretched blood to his limbs, and admitted to himself that he’d missed the thrill of prepping for a combat situation. Nothing quite made one feel alive like unknown danger.

Beside him, Kyra leaned across the table and asked Anj, “You said Jao went on the team to Bavinyar, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she nodded. “I spoke with him when he was on Coruscant.”

“And what about Ania? Did she go with them? Or did she leave some other way?”

The name *Ania* rang in Stazi’s memory, matched with *Solo*. He wondered what strange road this Kyra had taken to where she was now.

Anj’s expression fell. “Kyra... I’m sorry, but from what I gather, when they went to extract Yalta Val... Ania was captured by Chalk’s people. I’m so sorry.”

Hope fled her eyes in an instant. Kyra’s body sunk into its chair and she stared into nothing; it was like her whole world had fallen down.

Seen from the viewport of the admiral’s cabin aboard *War Hammer*, the space over Bavinyar looked bleakly calm. Debris from broken starships tumbled slow and weightless through the vacuum, appearing as gnarled silhouettes against the planet’s blue face. Federation warships stood out like fat gray diamonds amidst the stars while the combined Bavinyari and Black Spear fleet clustered closer to the planet, a dark stain. Despite the visible ravages of battle, no explosions or plasma-bursts lit up the sky and picket ships swept the void, clearing up wreckage as they would after a battle’s end.

Gunner Yage knew better. Fights that stopped suddenly could restart just as fast.

It hurt to think she wouldn’t be back in it. After failing to shoot down *Mynock* she’d been ordered back to *War Hammer* and had missed all of the first brawl. The ceasefire allowed time for her to be judged for her actions.

Over the years she’d almost gotten used to serving on her father’s ship, but right now she ached to answer to another officer. They might be harsher in their punishment, but she’d feel less ashamed before them. Rulf Yage stood on the other side of his desk. Gunner faced him, still in her flight suit with hands clasped behind her straight back, head lifted to attention. Her father’s eyes, thankfully, were more on the incident report on his desk than her but he lifted them occasionally to fix her a judgmental gaze.

Finally he said, “I realize these were very extenuating circumstances.”

She’d have preferred a scolding to mercy. It reeked of

favoritism. "I had my orders to intercept and shoot down *Mynock*. I failed them."

"And you feel terrible about it. But not as terrible as if you'd killed your brother, I think."

"Half-brother," she corrected.

Rulf pushed the datapad to the side of his desk. "Your report says that Skywalker made several, in your words, 'irreverent' comments before closing his transmission. I've never heard any remark of his that *wasn't* irreverent, so I'd like you to be more specific."

She swallowed. "Permission to speak off the record, sir??"

"Granted."

"Skywalker said there's no rebels on Bavinyar. If there *were*, then they'd be defending themselves with their own ships, not mercenaries."

"I'm not a fool, Gunn. The thought's crossed my mind as well."

"Has Chalk told you anything else about this operation? Anything more specific?"

"The pre-mission intelligence report I received was... lacking the usual rigor."

"Skywalker said if I wanted to know the truth, I should ask the regent."

Rulf arched a brow. "Are you suggesting *I* ask for you?"

"No, sir. I'm just repeating his words."

"I see. Gunner, this mission is less than ideal but I will still carry it out. Despite all the irregularities, there is nothing overtly *wrong* here. It's not as though I'm being asked to burn the planet to ash."

His voice got hard as he said it. Gunner knew what her father had done on Darth Krayt's orders, and how he still hadn't forgiven himself.

"Then we'll let the matter rest." She drew herself straight. "What's to be my punishment, sir?"

"There will be a mark on your record, of course... But I see no reason to bring this incident under full review."

Mercy, then. "Am I to return to command of Skull Squadron?"

"Frankly, Gunner, we need our best pilots because there's no telling what may happen next. The regent himself is about to go

down there, for a prisoner exchange he says, but I don't think--"

He was interrupted by a chime on his desktop comm unit. Rulf tapped the button. "This is the admiral. Is this urgent?"

"We're receiving a high-priority transmission from the *Jagged Fel* with the regent's authorization code," a voice buzzed. "Should I patch it through?"

"Of course. I won't keep him waiting." Rulf glanced at his daughter. "Last words before he departs, I expect."

"Should I step out?"

"I think that would be a good idea."

Before Gunner could even turn, the desktop holo-projector flickered on. Instead of Chalk's grim countenance they saw his Twi'lek aide.

"Miss Vao, this is unexpected," said Rulf. "Do you have a message from the regent?"

"Yes, sir, but not in the way you mean." Vao looked nervous; her voice shook slightly. "The regent doesn't know I'm making this call, and please, sir, he can't ever know."

"Miss Vao, if you're asking me to--"

"Sir, just watch the recording I'm about to send and do what you think is best. Please, sir, that's all I ask."

Before the admiral could protest, Astraal's image winked out and was replaced by that of Chalk himself, hoisting a bound woman upright by the hair. Rulf stared, unmoving; Gunner stalked back toward his desk, transfixed by the image there.

"Say something else to her," Chalk's voice grated on the recording. "Tell her to order her mercenaries to withdraw this instant, or I will snap your neck."

"Stop," said a new voice. A second holo appeared of an older woman, seated in a chair. Gunner realized this was a two-sided transmission record.

"Do it, girl." Chalk pulled the captive woman's hair, making her scream. Rulf winced. "At least give your mother some last words to remember you by."

But the captive turned to Chalk and snapped, "I hope you rot in every hell, you *shabla chak'aar*."

Suddenly Chalk was grabbing her by the throat. Gunner winced too. She'd always seen the regent as a stoic figure; his physical violence and anger was stunning. He lifted the woman off her feet, one hand still tight on her neck.

“Enough! Stop this! Now!”

Another woman appeared on the second holo, younger, with long dark hair to her shoulders. There was something familiar in the voice and figure but Gunner couldn’t immediately place it.

“Release Ania,” the woman said, “Or everyone on and over Bavinyar will know that I am here, and what you’ve done.”

Chalk was clearly stunned, but he said, “I’ve instructed every Federation ship to ignore hails from the planet.”

“Then the Bavinyari will hear, and Auchs’ mercenaries. And *they* will tell the rest of the galaxy exactly what you are.”

There was strength in that voice. Gunner recognized it but her mind refused to make sense. It was impossible.

“What do you want in return?” asked Chalk.

“Release Ania.”

“In exchange for what? I came here for the Tho Yor, not you.”

“And now you have both. That object in the ocean is a dead thing. We tried to communicate with it, but we failed.”

“You can’t expect me to take your word on that.”

“No. You can see for yourself. *I* can prove it to you,” Marasiah Fel said. “Let Ania go, Uncle, and I’ll surrender. You can put me back in prison and on my word, I swear I will never leave it.”

Located one hundred and eighty kilometers south-south-east of the submerged Tho Yor, the sole island chain in this portion of Bavinyar was a collection of cooled volcanoes where black rock jutted up from the sea and was clothed in greenery. Toward the eastern side of the chain the mountains levelled out and at the very end two small blunt peaks were bridged by a white-sand beach eight meters wide at its narrowest point. Foamy surf lapped slowly on either flank. Wide-frond palm trees dotted the higher ground and ringed both low hills like garlands.

It was a deceptively calm site for a prisoner exchange. Past the edge of one foothill, on solid ground covered by tall grass, sat *Mynock* and *Free Agent*. They’d decided there was no point in hiding what Chalk probably already knew. The regent’s insistence that they bring only two ships to the exchange had

given them excuse to hide Khat Lah's flyer. The organic ship was tucked away amidst the trees three islands west of here and they hoped its unusual construction would camouflage it from basic scans.

Marasiah hoped it would stay in hiding. She hoped her uncle wouldn't try to renege on his deal and she hoped her companions didn't act on foolish ideas of rescue, though they probably would.

She knew full well by now where hope got you.

When she'd spoken to Hogrum via transmission she'd spoken honestly. Tens of thousands of people had already died pointlessly for her sake. If she exposed her uncle's deeds she'd cause even more. She was sick of ruling and sick of running. In Hogrum's prison, perhaps, she'd have peace.

They'd tried to talk her out of it, of course. Cade had done it with his usual snarky comments, Marin and K'Kruhk more seriously. Khat Lah had been oddly silent; if he was expecting his mysterious help to arrive he was giving no hints. The Yuuzhan Vong was inscrutable to the last.

Marasiah stood apart from them as she waited for her uncle to come. She wandered out across the sandbar, feeling the ground slightly sink beneath every step. She watched the sun and felt warm wind play on her face. She and Antares had enjoyed a vacation on this world just days before his death. Beautiful water, beautiful weather, and each other. It felt like remembering another woman's life, but that was good, she thought, because if she remembered it directly it would hurt.

Sometimes she glanced behind her. Skywalker stood beside AG-37 and Marin Solo, all within the shadow of *Free Agent's* hull. The mechanic Sauk was still inside his ship, and likewise Skywalker's companions were in theirs. There was no telling if they'd have to make a fast takeoff. Azyln Rae stood with them outside and she watched her empress silently, eyes narrowed against the glare of sun on sand. On Cade's insistence, the Jedi K'Kruhk and Rasi Tuum had stayed with their ships at the refugee settlement. Talon was with Khat Lah and the other Yuuzhan Vong, crammed into their waiting flyer. What a strange group they made.

Marasiah wasn't sure how long she waited before she spotted flecks of darkness in the blue sky. They grew in size as she



watched, resolving into the shapes of two Imperial *Nune*-class shuttles with ovoid bodies and stout folding wings. She was dismayed but not surprised to find six TIE fighters flying escort.

“Already cheating on the deal. Not good.”

She turned to see Skywalker had come up behind her unnoticed. “We’re cheating too,” she reminded.

“Yeah, but he can cheat better.”

Marasiah sighed and looked back at the shuttles. “I expect my uncle will have an ysalamir with him. He’ll want me incapacitated right away. You and Marin-”

“We can take care of ourselves.”

They watched the ships get close. The howl of the TIEs preceded the lower hum of the shuttles’ engines. Finally the TIEs broke off and began flying wide circles around the island while the shuttles moved in to land near the opposite hill. Marin and Azlyn stepped across the sand to join Marasiah while AG-37 lingered beneath *Free Agent*. If it came to a fight, the assassin droid wouldn’t need to be close-in to make his shots.

Both Imperial shuttles lowered ramps. A full dozen stormtroopers walked out of each but they didn’t range far. Once they were clear a young man dressed in black stepped out of the right shuttle. Wind rustled his dark hair and a lightsaber bobbed at his hip. Eli Horn.

From the second ship came a taller older man, still in black, with a metal plate covering half his scarred face. Marasiah’s heart clenched. Seeing her uncle in the flesh brought back so many memories. Not just the awful ones, like when he’d admitted to arranging her father’s death, but the good ones, when he’d given her calm advice or soothed her after the deaths of her mother.

That the same man had been capable of both roused her great anger in her. Each side of Hogrum seemed to betray the other, making them both more monstrous. She’d given herself to her hate before, most notably on Milagro. If she surrendered to it now, what could she do? Destroy both shuttles perhaps, killing Chalk and Eli and Ania too. She’d make her father in his worst moment look like a saint. If the darkness inside her wasn’t so strong, so *tempting*, maybe she wouldn’t have had to hide for

three years. If she hadn't discovered her suppressed skill for hate, it all might have been different.

Cade put a hand on Marasiah's shoulder, jarring her. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"I told you not to interfere," she whispered without looking back.

They watched as new figures emerged from Chalk's shuttle. First was a stormtrooper with a yellow animal strapped to a rack on his back. Next came Ania, hands bound in front of her. Her face was bruised, her steps awkward. She wore the same white jacket and black trousers she always favored; somehow that made her state seem worse.

Cade leaned closer. "Listen. Give us a signal if you want A-gee to scorch that ysalamir. He can do it, you know."

"He can't take out two dozen stormtroopers, Skywalker. And neither can you."

"Give me challenge, you never know what I can do." He tried a cocky smile, but it didn't work.

She looked at Marin. The other woman had eyes on her daughter, everything else forgotten. Ania had nearly lost her mother breaking Marasiah out of jail. This seemed like a small repayment. She should have never left that prison.

They faced each other across the long stretch of sand. On Hogram's signal, Ania's stormtrooper escort began walking her forward. They stopped midway across the isthmus, waiting for Marasiah to walk the other half.

She did. Her steps were slow and even despite the softness of the beach. Sometimes she looked at Ania, growing closer every step. Sometimes she tilted her head back and looked at the beautiful sky, blue streaked by thin clouds. She might never see a sky again, or feel wind's soft touch. She wanted to savor this. She wanted her last moments of freedom to be peaceful, inside and out.

When she reached Ania, the stormtrooper stepped forward. The ysalamir's Force-repellant field enveloped her as he patted her down, then guided her forward by the elbow. He removed the stun cuffs from Ania's wrists and placed them on Marasiah's so her hands dangled useless in front of her.

"All right," said the faceless trooper. "Come along, miss." Not even a hint she'd once been his empress.

Before Marasiah budged, Ania grabbed her by the upper arm and leaned close. "You don't have to do this," she half-whispered, half-growled.

"It's better this way."

"I didn't bust you out of jail so you could walk back in."

"I'm fine with this." Marasiah pulled her arm free. "Consider it payment for all you've done for me. Goodbye, Ania."

Her cousin wanted to say more but the trooper commanded her to walk ahead. Ania stared down the beach at Cade, Azlyn, and her mother. Slowly, regretfully, she started toward them.

Marasiah spared once backward glance and felt satisfied. Then she turned toward her uncle's shuttle and her future. With empty peace in her heart, she walked across the sand.

Even in a place without time there was such a thing as waiting. When Marin had come to her, Tasha Ryo had cast her out. When Khat Lah returned she had expected another plea for something she couldn't provide. Instead he'd brought her something she hadn't expected, something she hadn't recognized at first because after so many timeless millennia inside the Tho Yor she'd forgotten even the possibility of its existence.

Khat Lah had shown her something new.

Tasha knew from their first encounter that Khat Lah was from a race born in a distant galaxy that had never heard of Je'daii, never had the Force locked away by the Whills and never had it dispensed and diluted through midi-chlorians. Yet they'd been expelled from the Force anyway after collectively falling to the dark, and the Yuuzhan Vong had voyaged for centuries through the lonely black between galaxies until coming to this one. They'd arrived as conquerers, wreaking unimaginable devastation, until being defeated by the Jedi. After that they had secluded on Zonama Sekot, a sentient planet and seed of their destroyed homeworld, in isolation from the rest of the galaxy.

Khat Lah had described it as a century's crawl to redemption. To her a century was nothing, and it had been a struggle to remember what that meant for mortals. He'd been the first of his kind to rediscover the Force, with Zonama Sekot's help, and when he'd first entered her Tho Yor on Tython she'd been

staggered by the purity of his connection with the Force, unreliant on midi-chlorians. She'd wondered if his living world could touch the Force with the same purity. If so, one day its cumulative life-essence might ascend to become a Whill, as other living worlds had done in eons long gone.

She'd thought those things, and they'd been in the back of her mind during her talk with Marin. Khat Lah's return brought them to the fore. The Yuuzhan Vong had explained to her the stakes and his plan. He himself admitted it might not work. They were working with power not even Tasha understood. The one clear point was that, succeed or fail, Tasha Ryo would cease to exist.

Tasha had spent so long as everything she could not conceive of being nothing. The very attempt scared her. She'd long dismissed fear as something for mortals and was shocked to feel that again too.

Khat Lah, Cade, Marin, Khat Lah again, each time bringing the shock of surprise. Her succession of visitors made her feel more alive than at any time since her sacrifice at Anil Kesh. Life- even as she knew it now- was a painful joyous thing, and she feared to give it up.

For the first time since sinking into Bavinyar's oceans twenty-five thousand timeless years ago, she'd dared reach outside her hard stone shell. During her voyage across the stars, guiding the Je'daii to Mortis and thence the ancient Whill-world, she'd reached out with the Force to touch the minds of her uncle Hawk, Master Quan-Jang, and Lanoree Brock. For her long isolation she'd retreated into herself but she retained the ability to touch, and to feel.

When opposing fleets arrived over Bavinyar she'd sensed it as a penumbra of tension. When the battle had joined she'd felt the explosion of anger. And when the ceasefire had been declared, she'd known that too.

All the while, Tasha had refrained from acting. In reaching outside herself she was reaching back into time, and she was discovering all the more how painful and joyous life could be. One after another, she'd felt them snuffed out.

And now, far closer than the warring fleets, she felt the convergence of four luminous beings. Conceived by the Whills and their midi-chlorians, the Skywalkers' connection with the

Force was not as pure as Khat Lah's, but their potential was so much greater. They were the hinge on which the fate of the Force would turn, and now all four stood together on one small island.

Tasha felt them converge and she felt them break apart. And she knew that if she did not act now there would be no point in acting at all. She had to rise and meet her fate with the bravery only mortals knew. It was a bittersweet sensation, another she'd forgotten.

After twenty-five thousand years the Tho Yor began to stir. It was half-buried on the ocean floor, walled by layered sediment and crusted by coral, and it was no easy task to emerge. Calling on the Force, Tasha commanded the ocean floor to tremble. She felt the earth's grip loosen and with a powerful wrench she commanded the black pyramid upward. With a great tear the Tho Yor broke free of its prison, and Tasha Ryo soared toward water-dim light.

The sun beat hard on Ania's sweat-damp skin and the sound of churning seemed to grind against her brain, still aching from the drugs her captors had pumped into her. Standing dazed on the beach, she looked forward to see her mother beckoning. She twisted back to see Marasiah led away in chains to the black-shrouded form of her uncle.

It wasn't right. Ania's whole self raged at the injustice but she had no idea what to do, and no strength act if she did. All she could do was stand in the sun and watch Marasiah go with a feeling of utter failure.

Marin came to her, as did Cade. They took her by either shoulder and started pulling her toward *Free Agent*, where AG-37 and Azlyn Rae waited.

"We have to do something," she told them both.

"The bastard's got the upper hand." Cade waved at the sky and the TIE fighters swinging slow circles around their island. "I'm sorry."

"But it's not *right*."

"Just come on, Ania," said her mother. "We'll help Marasiah... somehow."

But Marasiah didn't want to be helped. That much was clear, and despite all she'd been through Ania's cousin was as

damned stubborn as when they'd first met. Ania looked at her again, longingly, as Marasiah was led off the sandy isthmus toward Chalk's waiting shuttle.

And then the boom sounded. It was distant but it rolled like a shockwave through the salty ocean air. The whole island seemed to shake. Everyone stopped and looked in the direction of the noise, even Marasiah's captors.

There was something to see. A tiny speck hovered on the horizon. As they watched it drew closer and the speck resolved into a shape with four sharp corners, suspended ten or twenty meters above the waves and growing larger every second.

Ania didn't see any thrust-glow and heard no engine-roar. All she made out was the rending of air as a massive object flew through the sky at a speed past sound.

"Oh, kark me," Cade gasped.

Before Ania could ask what was happening, he and Marin both shoved her down. All three of them crouched in the sand and watched. The TIEs rushed to intercept the approaching object but beams of pure light- not laser bolts, just *light*- flashed from it. Three TIEs burst to flame instantly and tumbled into the ocean. The other peeled away frantically.

And then, without any apparent deceleration, the object shuddered to a half directly overhead. The whole island trembled like it might fall into the sea, and Ania stared at what must have been the Tho Yor.

At that moment she felt bowed not in fear but reverence, prostrate beneath a black diamond eclipsing the sun.

## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

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He bent to touch one knee to the floor, but he could not feel the bite of cold tile. His chest moved with intake and release, but air moved through tubules and metal pipelines instead of lungs. It was not like breathing at all. He lifted his head and vision panned from floor to the throne before him, but everything was framed through black goggle-rims and relayed to digital implants inserted into ravaged cornea.

"You have done well, my young apprentice," creaked the wizened monster on the throne.

"Thank you... my Master," said the creature who had been Anakin Skywalker. Darth Vader could not call himself a man.

"Truly, you have acquitted yourself well," continued Darth Sidious. "I'm sure you understand it was a test. After all, Anakin Skywalker possessed so many fond memories of the planet Naboo, especially those with his beloved Padmé..."

Just hearing that name from those withered lips filled Vader's black, empty chest with rage. But he stayed on his knee like a good servant and said, "The Naboo dissidents had to be exterminated, my Lord. Their queen is dead."

"Yes. That young girl was idealistic to harbor so many fugitive Jedi... and foolish. Inspired, no doubt, by the late Amidala..." His mouth twisted in another sick smile. "I am glad you were able to administer Imperial justice where it was needed."

Justice was not a word even Vader would use for the slaughter on Naboo. His mind flashed back days to the nighttime attack on Theed. That bright and noble city had been draped in snow and scarred by battle. Its grand plaza, down

which he'd once paraded beside Padmé, was in memory littered with bodies of stormtroopers, royal guardsmen, dead Jedi, Queen Apailana herself. Even the noble mausoleum to Padmé Amidala, which he'd visited in a moment of weakness, had not escaped undamaged.

"Tell me, Lord Vader," Sidious pronounced the title with sadistic relish, "Do you wish any reward for your services? As you know, I am not ungenerous."

Vader knew that. Like the dark side he embodied, Sidious offered the relief of concealment and the comfort of illusion. He had equipped the corpse of Anakin Skywalker with the tools to pretend he was a man.

But Vader did not want to pretend. "I do have a request."

"Good, good," Sidious chuckled. "I am so glad to see your ambition is still strong. What do you wish for, apprentice?"

"I wish to never go to Naboo again."

"Truly? You mean you don't wish to see lovely Theed... or the memorial to your dear Padmé?"

Stifling anger best he could, knowing his master still felt and relished it, Vader said, "No, my Lord."

"Very well, Lord Vader. I will take your request under advisement."

Which meant he would drag things out, pretending to honor it for a time, perhaps for years, before finding pretext to return Vader to that world. Just as the dark was generous it was patient. It planted seeds and waited a long time before letting them sprout.

Because the blossom was a long way off, Vader asked, "How may I serve you next, my Lord?"

"The Jedi are still our greatest threat. Your old teacher Obi-Wan still eludes us, as does Master Yoda. They are your highest priority."

"I will spare no efforts, Lord." Other angers smoldered in his chest. Hatred for Obi-Wan- brother, friend, betrayer- was one of those. "What of other resistance to your rule?"

"Pitiful rabble. The Bavinyari rebels have been crushed. Moff Tarkin and Admiral Screed are pacifying the Western Reaches as we speak. There is resistance in the senate, of course, but I have the fools well in hand. Our enemy is now what it has always been."



“The Jedi,” Vader said.

“No, you fool,” Sidious snapped. “Our foe is the Force itself! For centuries the Sith have exerted ourselves against it, first subtly, then with growing confidence. My master and I inflected our will on the Force itself, before I killed him.” Sidious cackled happily. “Now we are triumphant, but we must be vigilant to ensure that triumph. After all, Lord Vader, the Force may yet strike back.”

The boy called Anakin Skywalker had been told he *was* the weapon commissioned by the Force to defeat darkness. Growing up the weight of that prophecy had been suffocating. Obi-Wan and Padmé had been his only means of escape. With his friend and lover he had sometimes pretended he was a normal man.

Vader still didn’t know if the prophecy had been anything besides Qui-Gon’s delusion. Once, during the heart of the Clone Wars, he’d thought he was completing his destiny by confronting the father, son, and daughter on that strange alien world. The son had already killed the daughter; after the father killed himself Anakin slew the son, and once all three great Force-wielders died their planet- if that is what it had been- crumbled and crashed and disappeared in a flash of light. Anakin and his companions had woken up in an undamaged shuttle in deep space, with no trace of the eight-sided monolith that had drawn them in.

It had been a surreal experience, and Anakin had come out of it with gaps in his memory. He’d been ready to dismiss it as a dream, but his companions remembered many of the same events. Further, after they’re reported to incident to the Jedi Council, the archivists on Coruscant had combed the records for any corroboration of what they’d found. To his surprise, they’d found a few scattered references on millennia-old records to a strange world, dubbed ‘Mortis’ by one ancient Jedi, on which three Force-wielding beings- a father, son, and daughter- existed in precarious balance. None of those encounters had ended like Anakin’s had.

Maybe it had been real, maybe not, but the Clone Wars had grinded on, seemingly unaffected, and so had Anakin’s life. In time he’d dismissed it as a dream after all and focused on other priorities, of which he had plenty.

But he'd never fully forgotten it, just like he'd never forgotten the Chosen One prophecy. If there was any truth to that, and he had been created through the will of the Force, Sidious had shown whose will was stronger. The Jedi had attempted to train and tame him, but it was Sidious who'd mastered his fate all along. Since he was a boy Sidious had cultivated him, encouraging his arrogance and entitlement, eliciting secrets through the guise of fatherly tenderness. Anakin had loved the man, almost as he'd loved Padmé and Obi-Wan.

But Anakin had been a fool, desperate to fulfill his destiny but desperate to human. In seeking to reconcile those impossible halves he'd laid himself open for manipulation and destruction. Ultimately, he'd received the end he deserved.

It was good that Darth Vader was beyond all that.

To Sidious he said, "I will keep vigilant, my Lord."

"I am sure you will, Lord Vader. Rise and go. Return to your quarters and meditate. I'm sure you'll soon be presented a chance to show your dark talents yet again."

"I'm sure," Vader agreed and rose to both feet.

He walked out of the throneroom on legs that were not legs. Guided by eyes that were not eyes he breathed through a chest without lungs and made his way slowly through the corridors of the emperor's grand palace, back to the small sanctum where he was safe from everything but Sidious' omniscient beckon.

Sidious often spoke of the dark side as a vehicle of liberation. Vader tried to keep that in mind. Anakin Skywalker had not had a happy life. Real or imagined, his destiny had been a curse. Vader was free from that. More, he was no longer on the side that fumbled for truth and staggered to its own immolation. He was a creature of the dark side now. The dark was generous and patient, and it always won.

And it was all he'd ever have.

PART IV



BRIDGE ACROSS FOREVER



## Chapter Thirty-One

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When she first saw the Tho Yor suspended in the air, Talon thought the Force had returned. The rush of purpose she felt was that strong, and it sung in her heart like joy.

Propelled straight skyward by its dovin basals, Khat Lah's flyer pushed free of the trees in which it had hidden and turned its nose straight toward the island on which the prisoners were being exchanged. The Tho Yor hovered in place over the central sandbar, gleaming for the sea-water still spilling down its rough black surface. As Talon watched from the flyer's cockpit, one TIE fighter attempted to dive-bomb the ancient ark and was blasted from the sky by a burst of pure bright energy.

The Tho Yor was *alive*. Talon thought she could feel it, but as she calmed herself she realized it was her own excitement. The Force hadn't come back to her, not yet, but it was so *close*.

As the flyer's pilots shot them toward the island, she turned to Khat Lah. "What did you tell it? How did you get it to rise?"

But the Yuuzhan Vong ignored her. Staring not at the Tho Yor but at the beach below he declared, "Quickly, we must save the empress!"

Talon looked beneath the ark to see chaos breaking out on the beach. She caught the flash of small-arms fire, some directed up toward the Tho Yor while other bolts danced back and forth across the sandbar. As the flyer swooped low, blaster-bolts were directed at it too. The craft banked in a tight circle and Talon looked down to see a crowd of stormtroopers gathered around one tiny dark-haired figure they were hauling toward a shuttle.

She also saw another figure, black-clothed and solitary, standing with an ignited lightsaber in hand.

“Protect Marasiah!” Khat Lah called. “Retrieve her, quickly!”

The flyer decelerated, lowered altitude, and prepared to deploy help. Talon still had no love for the ex-empress. Despite having the Force she wallowed in self-pity and failed righteousness. But for the Force to return to the galaxy they might need her, so as a group of Yuuzhan Vong warriors raced down to the flyer’s hold, Talon joined them without hesitation, lightsaber in hand.

The landing ramp had already been dropped and the flyer swooped low over the beach. The cluster of stormtroopers saw them coming and turned to fire. Four Yuuzhan Vong, armed with amphistaffs and thud bugs, leaped from the flyer, using the Force to soften their landing. Talon had no such aid but she threw herself into the air anyway. Even without the Force she could use her body perfectly; she bent her knees, straightened her spine, and held her lightsaber ahead of her like a scarlet spear. She landed perfectly, boots on the shoulders of one trooper, blade through his helmet. As his body dropped she kicked backwards, landed on the sand, ducked beneath a volley of bolts and reared up, spinning her saber in a perfect circle that cut down two more troopers.

She didn’t have the Force, but she had hope. Talon had never realized what an amazing thing it was.

The beach was in full chaos now. The four Yuuzhan Vong had almost reached Marasiah. Talon was further away, closer to the middle of the sandbar than the shuttles. Troopers behind her were exchanging fire with Cade Skywalker; she caught a flash as Ania Solo’s assassin droid dropped one from long-range. Marin Solo was charging ahead with impressive speed for an old woman, seemingly determined to get to Marasiah. Khat Lah’s flyer was coming around for another pass, this time to recover the ex-empress, though a TIE had dropped behind to nibble at its aft. Talon scanned the chaos for Hogrum Chalk and couldn’t spot him.

But she did see Eli Horn, charging through the surf toward Marasiah, white saber blazing.

Talon rushed to intercept him. One long leap propelled her to

the edge of the beach and she landed in a spray of wet sand. It splashed on Eli's black armor and he skidded to a halt. The young man snarled and hefted his lightsaber defensively. Talon slashed at him and he blocked, then nimbly counter-thrust. She had hope but he had the Force, which gave him definite advantage.

The Sekotan flyer soared low overhead. Talon jumped away from Eli and twisted to watch as the craft dropped over the beach, hovering on soundless dovin basals so Marin and the four Yuuzhan Vong could shepherd Marasiah onto its ramp. The flyer shook as that one pesky TIE continued to harass it, then soared skyward.

The ex-empress was saved. Good. Now Talon had to save herself. She turned back on Eli, whose face was twisted in anger. He shouted at her, "Why are you doing this? Why?"

"That's why!" she shouted back, thrusting her saber toward the Tho Yor.

"But why *you*?" His voice cracked.

Talon caught a flash of green in the corner of her eye. She made the mistake of twisting her head toward it; Eli followed her gaze and got a split-second warning before Cade Skywalker charged at him. He caught the older man's blade on his own then jumped back, now calf-deep in foamy surf. The tide was sucking all their feet into the sand and Talon had to wrench hers forcefully out.

"Looks like things didn't do according to plan for you, kid," Cade bared his teeth. "And oh, look, your boss is leaving you behind."

Eli dared glance at the shuttles. The one Chalk had arrived on was already pushing up on repulsorlift gusts. Stormtroopers were pouring back into the second one, preparing for a strategic withdrawal.

"Don't make us do it the hard way," Cade said, but he hefted his lightsaber to attack.

So did Talon. They edged on Eli from opposite angles. The young man looked back and forth between them, frantic, angry and desperate. Talon didn't need to Force to know he'd fight them to the end. He had nothing to live for if he failed here.

But perhaps she could disarm him. Unlikely sympathy for her old apprentice moved her. Talon took the first step and thrust

sharply at Eli. Feet stuck in the surf he twisted awkwardly to deflect, then twisted again toward Skywalker-

-and then a great wave surged from the sea, washed across the beach, and swallowed them all.

Mystical ancient Force-magic was beyond Ania and always had been. Physical, material things always made more sense to her, and even as chaos broke out on the beach, she knew that if the Tho Yor had torn itself out of the ocean, that would have caused a massive displacement of water and a powerful rippling movement that would race across the ocean surface and might even be strong enough to reach their island.

Therefore, she'd expected the tsunami that washed across the beach. Azlyn had already led her inside *Free Agent*, taking her forcefully by the shoulders after her mother had insisted on rushing into the fray to rescue the empress. With Sauk's help they'd gotten her to the cockpit just in time to see the great wave hit.

The sandy isthmus connecting the two island peaks was instantly consumed. Stormtroopers in their white-armor shells were swept off their feet but Ania's eyes were on the white, red, and emerald lightsabers. All three blades winked out and the figures holding them were quickly obscured. The tsunami carried sand and silt with it, churning the once-blue ocean water into a brackish mess.

"Dammit," Ania breathed, "Sauk, tell me the engines are hot."

Her friend reached for thruster controls. "Warming up. I can fire repulsors now."

"Wait, where's A-gee?" asked Azlyn.

The wave had hit the high ground on which the freighters had parked, though not as strongly. Ania pushed out of her co-pilot's chair and ran back to the open landing ramp, Azlyn behind her. The two women got there in time to see AG-37 stomping up it, wet sand caking his metal legs halfway up.

"I am sodden but undamaged," the droid reported. "I am more concerned about our allies on the beach."

As far as Ania knew their only ally was Cade- Eli and Talon sure as hells didn't count- but Cade was enough. "Let's get topside and see if we can pick 'em up," she said.



Despite the residual drugs slurring her system, Ania made it back to the cockpit before Azlyn and AG-37. The first thing she noticed when she dropped into the co-pilot's spot was the water had mostly washed off the isthmus now, leaving behind a long stretch of sloppy, darkened sand. Then she noticed both Federation shuttles had taken off, and that the Tho Yor had tripled its altitude and was now much smaller in the sky.

"Think that's our cue to get out of here?" Ania asked, looking at the high black diamond.

"We got a hail from Khat Lah. He says he's got Marasiah and it's time to punch out." Sauk swiveled back to look at AG. "You can do the honors."

The Mon Cal and assassin droid switched places as quickly as possible. Azlyn stood over the back of Ania's chair, scouring the beach. "I see him," she declared, "I see Cade!"

Ania followed her stabbing finger to see one man with messy bright hair rearing out of the foam on the beach's north edge. Yet as AG-37 prepared for takeoff, *Mynock* got there first. The big red freighter roared to life and lurched toward Cade, skirting the beach so low its repulsors kicked up a storm of sand.

"They've got him," Ania sighed. "Tell me we can take off now."

"Our allies seem to be accounted for," reported AG-37. "Closing landing ramp and firing engines now."

And with that perfectly droidlike, stomach-lurching agility, AG propelled *Free Agent* upward. The island fell away beneath them and Ania could see what Tho Yor still rising in the sky, the Sekotan flyer flanking it, and the perfect ocean beneath. For a second her head swam with the realization that despite the dire straits they'd been in just minutes ago, they'd all gotten out of it safe and intact, each and every one of them, and they all had the Tho Yor- and the Force- to thank for it.

"Hey, A-gee," Ania said breathlessly, "Have I told you how much I missed this?"

"No, but the enthusiasm is noted."

She was about to ask where Jao was when the droid sent them after the Tho Yor with another gut-lurching leap.

The control throttle shuddered in Jariah's hands, like all of *Mynock* was protesting the half-second full-bore thruster-burst

that shot them across the island to Cade's position. Normally Deliah would have scolded him too- that kind of thing was hell on the engines- but right now she jumped from her co-pilot's seat, said, "Hold here, I'm getting Cade!" and sprinted out.

Jariah checked his scanners as he waited. The two Imp shuttles had gotten the hell out of here and, unfortunately, the Tho Yor hadn't seen fit to blast them with those powerful energy cannon things that had made short work of the TIEs. The sensors said the Tho Yor was five hundred meters overhead and climbing, and Jariah could feel that damn thing in the Force. It was a bright beacon of power and more. There was a *mind* to it, that ancient Jedi or whatever Cade had talked about, and it was beckoning them to follow.

Not just Cade and his Skywalker kin and not just Khat Lah's righteously awakened Vong. It was calling Jariah too, like it *wanted* him. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

He didn't have time to worry. The rescue team returned with the clatter of footsteps and labored breath. Jariah twisted in his chair to see Deliah stagger in with an arm around Cade's waist. He was soaked all right, trousers caked in patches of wet sand, and his tangled blonde hair was plastered against his face. But he was upright and breathing, and that was good enough.

And, stepping out of the corridor behind them, was a pretty, lethal Twi'lek all done up in red and black.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Jariah blurted.

"That's what I asked," Deliah said as she sat Cade's wet body into the co-pilot's seat.

"Don't tell me she's one of the good guys now," Jariah glared as she stood stoic at the cockpit's rear.

"Good guys, bad guys, who gives a kark," Cade said as he pulled sand-sticky curls off his face.

"Correct," Talon agreed. "Right now, we desire the same thing."

Jariah wanted to argue and Blue did too, but Cade fixed them both with firm stares. "Let's get going *pateesas*. I can feel that Tho Yor. It wants to punch out of here."

Jariah felt it too, not just beckoning but commanding them to follow. He didn't much like that and he didn't like having that Sith *schutta* onboard after all she'd done, but he wasn't in position to argue with Cade or the Force.

So he gripped the throttle tight once more, reoriented *Mynock* toward the sky, and punched out.

Eli Horn was soaked to his skin, cold for the recycled air and hot for his shame. But maybe he still had a chance.

The tsunami had been a blessing, of a sort. He'd been washed clear of Skywalker and Talon, freeing him from a battle he probably couldn't have won. He'd pulled himself from the surf to see both Federation shuttles leaving; it seemed Chalk had given up on him.

But *Free Agent* and *Mynock* had been there still, sitting on their hillside perches with landing ramps down. He knew Skywalker's ship would never be safe, but Ania Solo's ship might, so he'd raced for it, using the Force to speed himself across the sloppy wet sand and finally propel himself onto the ramp just as it retracted and sealed.

And now he lay on the ship's cool deck and felt the metal vibrate beneath him as *Free Agent* soared up through the atmosphere. He heard faint chatter from the cockpit on the opposite end of the ship but they didn't seem to have noticed him. With the Force he could reach out and feel the beings aboard. He sensed three, and none seemed to sense him back, which meant he was the only Force-user. There was also the assassin droid, invisible from the Force but the most deadly of the bunch. Thankfully he'd grabbed his lightsaber from the surf.

Beyond the immediate lives Eli felt another presence. Its power blazed bright, and he felt it calling him forward. It had to be the Tho Yor. Ania and her comrades wouldn't feel it but Skywalker and Khat Lah would, and *Free Agent* would join them as they raced to whatever destination the Force had decreed for them.

And Eli would be with them on the way. He didn't know what he'd do when they got to their destination. Maybe, he thought with cruel irony, the Force would provide him with his answer.

Until then he would hide and wait.

The ships tensely marshalled in orbit over Bavinyar detected signs of a skirmish on the planet's surface, but no ships from any side took it was license to renew hostilities. Instead

everyone waited tensely, peering at sensor readouts and watching with increased confusion as the two Federation shuttles pulled out of the atmosphere and cut a straight line for the *Jagged Fel*.

Less than a minute later, new ships emerged from the planet. The sensors on the BDF flagship *Jereveth Syne* detected two freighters, one shuttle, and two more objects of unknown design that didn't seem to be propelled by standard means.

Jao had peering over the sensor officer's shoulder the entire time, and when the scanners produced the first magnified visual readout, his heart leapt. The tracking camera showed only tiny specks moving against Bavinyar's surface, but he instantly recognized two for *Mynock* and *Free Agent*.

And that large diamond-shaped object, moving on mysterious power, could only be the Tho Yor awakened.

Jao hurried to the communications console. "I need an open line!" he declared.

The BDF ensigns looked at him in befuddlement. To them he was just a senatorial bodyguard who'd taken inexplicable interest in whatever was happening on the surface. Even Monia, Saarai, and Yalta Val, watching him from the other side of the bridge, looked confused.

"It's the Tho Yor," Jao declared. "It's *coming*!"

Monia blinked in shock. Val rushed forward to see the sensor readout. Saarai stood like his words had frozen her cold.

Jao turned from them to Captain Rand. "Please, sir," he said, "We need to use your comm system."

The Bavinyari was clearly frustrated with the way Monia's staff kept intruding on his ship. He was also damned curious as to what was going on. The second emotion won out, and he told his comm ensign, "Do it. Open a channel."

"Thank you, sir," Jao said and hurried to the station. "Contact that *Helox*-class freighter coming into orbit now."

The comm ensign assented. Jao waited breathless for a good thirty seconds before a small holo appeared. It showed Cade Skywalker's head-and-shoulders, and it seemed through the blurry image that his hair was even messier than usual.

"Oh," Cade said, "It's you."

Jao hadn't expected a better greeting. "You woke up the Tho Yor! How?"

“Don’t ask me, I didn’t do it. Why the hell are you here, anyway?”

“That’s another long story. I’m on the BDF flagship.”

“Listen, we’re gonna try and punch outta the system. If you wanna follow, be my guest, but right now we got a gauntlet to run.” Cade looked like he was reaching for the shut-off switch, but he paused and added, “By the way, we rescued your *municheeka*.”

Now things felt truly surreal. “You mean Ania? Ania was *here*?”

“Right now she’s back on her own ship. I recommend you call her once we get the hell outta here, ‘cause it’s going to get messy, right about.... now.”

Cade shut off the comm and Jao hurried back to the tactical station. Val and Monia had joined Captain Rand there, and all four of them watched the holo as the fleeing ship and their Tho Yor ran into a Federation intercept force over Bavinyar. The readouts were confused; they reported the exchange of laser fire as TIE Predators and a single Imperial-model gunship tried to block the escape. The smaller ships scattered but the big Tho Yor seemed to charge straight ahead. Sensors reported direct hits on the object’s hull, followed by a series of energy bursts, powerful but not traditional plasma-bolts. The Federation gunship was suddenly drifting, the TIEs gone.

“What is this... Tho Yor?” asked Rand. “Is it a weapon? Is that what this was all about, a secret weapon?”

“It’s a lot more than a weapon,” Jao said. It was more than even he knew.

The Tho Yor and its escorts continued to push toward the edge of Bavinyar’s gravity well. A larger Federation ship, a full frigate, moved to block them this time. Sensors reported more direct hits on the Tho Yor, and Jao’s heart skipped when *Free Agent* took a blast. The Tho Yor counterattacked its mysterious way but the frigate seemed to hold its own.

It was not, however, powerful enough to hold back the escape run. The Tho Yor blurred and disappeared into hyperspace. Its trailing ships did likewise: first *Mynock*, then the shuttle, then the organic flyer, and finally *Free Agent*.

And then space over Bavinyar went still again.

Captain Rand, as confused as the rest of them, asked his crew,

“Has there been any response from the *Jagged Fel*? Anything at all?”

“Nothing, sir,” the comm ensign said.

Awkward silence lingered over the bridge. Rand turned to Jao and said, “Young man, do you have the slightest idea what the hell is going on?”

“Only a little.” He turned on Monia. “Senator, we need to take your shuttle.”

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I’m not sure yet, but we need to follow that Tho Yor.”

The senator looked down, thinking. She’d already burned her bridge back to Chalk and probably couldn’t even go back to Coruscant. The only place to move was ahead. Jao wanted to say that, but he didn’t need to. She could come to the conclusion on her own.

“Very well.” Monia drew straight. “Captain Rand, your help has been incalculable, and I swear we’ll find a way to repay it. But right now, we must be going.”

The captain opened his mouth to speak, discovered he had nothing to say, and simply nodded.

Jao looked at Yalta Val, who gave him a tight encouraged smile. And he looked back at Saarai, still planted on the far side of the bridge. Her expression had changed from blank shock to something even more curious: resignation.

As Hogrum stood on the *Jagged Fel*’s bridge and looked out on a peaceful Bavinyar below, he felt like he could vomit fire. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, and in the worst possible way. Marasiah and Ania had both escaped. The Tho Yor was awakened and leading its followers to some promised place. And though Eli Horn had become more a liability than a tool, Hogrum was now bereft of him as well.

According to Astraal, a half-dozen messages had come from Coruscant asking for him to comment on just what the hells had happened at Bavinyar. Senators Eldon and Brighton were among the requestors. Captain Worgaan, meanwhile, reported that Sora Auchs and Captain Rand of the BDF had both sent tentative hails, and Admiral Yage requested to speak directly.

Hogrum had never felt more overwhelmed. Half of him wanted to fling the *Jagged Fel* into hyperspace, he didn’t care

where, and escape from all this. The other half wanted to bombard Bavinyar until he'd burned its oceans to steam, then soar back to Coruscant and erase the senate too. All his years of careful planning were falling to nothing. The Force was actively working to ruin him.

He grinded teeth inside a clenched jaw. He would not permit that. He'd not allowed Eshkar Niin or Roan Fel to see triumph, and he'd deny it to the Force too. It was his foremost enemy and always had been. Hogrum understood that now.

Once he thought he could control the tenor of his voice, he told Worgaan to open a connection with *War Hammer*. When Admiral Yage's holo appeared before him, Hogrum said, "I gave you clear orders to stop any ships trying to leave Bavinyar. You *failed*, Admiral."

Yage flinched at the scolding. "I apologize, sir, but I only have so many ships, and the... object that escaped Bavinyar was using weapons we were totally unfamiliar with."

His words were a statement, his tone a question. "I didn't know what the object was capable of," Hogrum admitted. "but the task of stopping it was yours. You were remarkably unsuccessful. Even its support craft escaped undamaged."

"I know, sir, and I'm willing to take responsibility."

Yage bowed his head like he was offering his neck for a blade. The admiral was normally more prideful than that; it was almost like he wanted to be relieved.

But Hogrum had no one here to replace him. "Admiral, you are to hold position over Bavinyar. Prevent the Black Spear and BDF ships from leaving but do not engage. If they try to contact you, reply only that they will not be harmed if they hold position."

"I understand, sir." This time Yage sounded relieved. "What will you do with the *Jagged Fel*?"

Scouring the Senate from Coruscant's face still tempted, but he wasn't ready to do it yet. His rational mind still reined in panic and anger, barely. "For the moment I'll hold position with your fleet," he said. "I will tell you when my position changes."

"Thank you for keeping me informed... Regent Chalk."

The admiral was acting strangely; likely he distrusted being kept in the dark on so many things. As long as he stayed loyal,

Hogrum didn't care. He shut off the link and took a breath. He was aware the eyes of the bridge crew were on him, seeking guidance. He had none to give but he still had to look strong. It was the least a leader could do.

"Captain Worgaan," he said, "I have need of your study, and your comm system."

The man saluted. "You have it as long as you need, Regent."

Hogrum still had options. He'd put his spies galaxy-wide on high alert for sign of the Tho Yor. He'd continue to the resistance. He might still salvage this; he had to believe that.

But as he started for the exit Astraal said softly, "Regent, sir, a message came from General Jaeger when you were down on the planet."

He'd totally forgotten about Selvaris. "What was it?"

"I'm not sure. The general insisted it was for your eyes only. I've stored the message in the your private datafile."

Hogrum braced himself. "Thank you, Miss Vao. I'll review it immediately."

He allowed the hands at his sides to clench to angry fists as he strode toward the captain's salon. As he stepped through the door and prepared himself for another disaster, his mind lingered on Astraal. He'd glimpsed her face in passing through the corner of his eye, but her expression snagged attention. It had been, inexplicably, a tight-lipped smile.

Marasiah was free and alive. To her surprise she was pleased by that.

She'd walked toward her uncle's shuttle with a black satisfaction. Then chaos had broken out and she'd been swept into this organic flyer by Marin Solo and a herd of Yuuzhan Vong. She'd watched from the cockpit as they chased the Tho Yor out of the planet's atmosphere, and when the ancient ark had battled with Federation ships she'd marveled against herself at the giant double-pyramid's dreamlike agility and inexplicable weapons. And all the while she'd felt it in the Force, leading them on, apparently speaking directly to Khat Lah's living ship and guiding it into hyperspace.

It had been a rain of action and stream of marvels, and for the first time since Antares' death, maybe longer, the Force seemed a thing of magic again.



Marasiah tried to temper hope. As they sailed through the lightspeed blur she asked Khat Lah, "Is the Tho Yor guiding us, or did you guide it?"

"I would say both. I offered a location for it to flee to, but I did not know if it would go there until it leaped to hyperspace. We are now on that course."

"So we're going to a sanctuary?" asked Marin.

"I hope it will be more than that."

"What *are* you hoping for?" prodded Marasiah.

"I cannot say. I don't even know if it's possible." Despite everything, the Yuuzhan Vong was still evasive.

"Do you think this Tho Yor can open us up to the Force again?" pressed Marin.

That time he refused to answer at all. Marasiah growled, "I hope your sanctuary is well-hidden. My uncle will stop at nothing to find us now."

"It's a big galaxy," Marin muttered.

"And Hogrum can reach anywhere."

"Calm yourselves," said Khat Lah. "Rest while you can. The journey to our destination will not be long."

Marasiah knew better than to ask for more. There was no space for seclusion on the cramped alien ship but she tried to be alone within herself. It was difficult; she'd not been around this many Force-sensitive beings in years and she had to remember how to wall herself off from their feelings. At least Marin devoted herself to solitary meditation.

Khat Lah's not-long journey still lasted nearly ten hours. He knew when the end was coming and called Marasiah and Marin both to the cockpit. Standing past the shoulders of seated pilots masked by cognition hoods, they watched the swirl of hyperspace fall away and a great starfield fill their vision. The Tho Yor flashed into existence a second later, followed by *Mynock*, *Free Agent*, and one Jedi shuttle.

"Where are we?" asked Marin. "A star system?"

Khat Lah exchanged words in Yuuzhan Vong with his pilots, then said, "Yes. It has no proper name and no habitable worlds, only a cartographer's designation."

"What sector are we in?" Marasiah asked.

"By standard chart, the Tolonda."

That was in the Outer Rim, and though the name was familiar

Marin couldn't recall a single system there. The stars panned to the side as the flyer angled toward a light-point brighter than the rest. With no standard sensor boards Marasiah felt helpless and cut-off from surrounding space. She resigned herself to waiting as their strange Yuuzhan Vong ship moved through the system.

She didn't even notice the planet at first, as they approached from its nightside face. When it partially eclipsed the brightening glare of the system primary, she reached out with the Force to sense life on that planet. There was something unusual about it, something Marasiah couldn't place, but Marin sucked in breath beside her.

"What is it?" she asked her aunt. "Do you know this world?"

She only nodded. Marasiah watched as they circled partway around the planet, revealing its daylit side. Most of the sphere was covered in rich green swathes, punctuated occasionally by enclosed sea and expanses of dry brown.

As they drew nearer, Yuuzhan Vong crowded into the cockpit. Marasiah found herself packed on all sides, and every being emanated anticipation and reverence. Then, finally, she understood.

"You've led the Tho Yor *home*," she told Khat Lah.

"Indeed." The Yuuzhan Vong was almost smiling. "Do you feel it? Zonama Sekot sends its greetings."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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There was so much life, and it shocked Tasha Ryo to the core. The entire planet before her blazed with the power of a single existence, unlike anything she'd experienced as either a mortal or as the Tho Yor's soul. The knowledge gifted to her by the Ones of Mortis had told her about worlds so rich with the Living Force that they attained communion with the Cosmic, shed crude matter and ascended to become Whills. They'd done so by touching the Force purely, without the limits of using midi-chlorians as conduits. Zonama Sekot, a wandering stranger cast out by another galaxy, had alone regained that connection.

The mind called Sekot was still young, far younger than hers. Indeed, her ancient self sensed that the living world was in many ways a child, still groping for understanding of itself. Its raw power, however, was unlike anything Tasha had ever encountered. Just being in its presence was humbling.

She felt it reach out to the new arrivals. It passed over the four starships quickly, but it probed her with curiosity. Tasha had spent too long in isolation, not only from space and time but from other life. The escape from Bavinyar reminded her how desperate and rich mortality could be. Now she relearned another joy as she discovered Sekot, and Sekot discovered her.

Reaching out with the Force she spoke without speech, saying, *I am Tasha Ryo.*

And in the same way the great world replied, *I am Sekot.*

*The one called Khat Lah led me here. He says you helped open him to the Force again and can do the same for his people.*

*I cannot promise, but I pray you are right.*

She sensed its trepidation, not just toward the task but to her. *Khat Lah thinks I can help you, and you can help me. We're both alone in the galaxy, the only ones of our kind. Perhaps together we can do what we couldn't alone. I have the knowledge and you have the strength.*

Still hesitant, Sekot asked, *What do you think I can do for you?*

And she told him. Tasha repeated the theory Khat Lah said raised on Bavinyar and expanded on it, pouring in knowledge instilled in her by the Ones.

When she was done Sekot said, *You ask so much of yourself.*

Its empathy warmed her. *I ask much of you, too.*

*There's no guarantee it will work.*

*I know. I understand if you need time to prepare yourself.*

Time had suddenly become critical again. Sekot agreed and retreated within itself, marshalling the strength to do what had to be done. Tasha retreated too, letting her Tho Yor drift in easy orbit over the living world while she gathered the knowledge, and more, the will to cross that final line.

She'd spent millennia inside the Tho Yor, trapped in strange limbo between death and ascension without the strength to move in either direction. Tasha was far from mortal but had been freshly reminded of how mortality felt. She'd learned anew how death frightened and change repelled.

Though she was not a Whill she felt a strange pity for them. Once living beings, they'd joined with the Cosmic Force so fully they could only vaguely direct the flow of the Living. For all their power and wisdom they were removed from the sensation and passion of life. If they hadn't forgotten, perhaps they could have found a way to remain in the Living Force instead of blocking it off. They might have erected a bridge instead of a wall.

Tasha wondered which fate would befall her. She resolved to cling to the memory of life even when she moved further from time and fully past living.

Though it had taken hours, the flight from Bavinyar to Zonama Sekot had seemed to pass in a flash. The great green world sat in front of them now, but none moved to approach.

They hung in position around the Tho Yor, which itself wheeled a slow orbit over the planet's daylit side.

Ania had never been into Force-mysticism, but she liked oddities, and legends of a verdant world ruled by a single communal mind had intrigued her since childhood. She'd never really believe it then, and she wasn't sure if she believed it now. All she knew was that, for maybe the first time ever, she wished she could touch the Force, just to find out if Sekot would touch her back.

"Have you ever been down there?" Ania asked Azlyn Rae. The two of them lingered in the cockpit, both drawn to the green planet that lit half the viewport.

"I've never even seen it until now," the scarred woman said. "I heard about it, of course, from Cade and Cade's father, and some of the other Masters."

"You sound like you always wanted to go."

"I did," Azlyn said. Her smile was sad and Ania didn't have to ask why. There seemed little point in visiting a planet alive in the Force if you were deaf to it all.

A signal lit up on the sensor board and Ania leaned forward to check it. A fifth starship had arrived in-system and her heart beat fast; then she saw what it was and felt simply confused.

Azlyn leaned in to see the console too. "A Mon Cal MC-28 transport. Somebody else from Bavinyar? Or a rebel ship?"

"I don't know. They're heading right toward us but they haven't started shooting."

"Cause for optimism?"

"Let's find out." Ania dropped into the co-pilot's seat and reached for the comm board, but before she touched it, it lit up with an incoming call. She flipped the switch to receive and was greeted with the face she'd most wanted to see but never expected.

"Ania!" Jao's eyes lit up. "Oh, thank the Force you're alive."

"Thank that Tho Yor," she replied, and realized that might have meant the same thing. To Azlyn she said, "Get Sauk and A-gee up here."

As the other darted out of the cockpit, Jao said, "I'm in the shuttle, with Senator Gahan."

Their mission to Coruscant felt forever ago. "Is Yalta Val with you?"

“Yes, and Saaraï too. The senator gave us a lift to Bavinyar.”

“*You* were there? Where?”

“On the BDF flagship.”

“You’re kidding,” Ania laughed. “You mean *you* convinced them to throw in on our side?”

“I think it was Saaraï, actually.”

“Makes sense.” She leaned back and crossed her arms. “You don’t exactly have a silver tongue.”

Jao’s initial joy wilted. “Ania, I am so, *so* sorry for leaving you back on Coruscant. I know that can’t make up for what happened, but I never stopped trying to find a way to help you.”

“You mean you ran all the way to Bavinyar for me?”

He flustered again. “Well, ah, not technically, since I didn’t know you’d be there. The Tho Yor, that was why we came, plus, well, the senator’s business—”

She laughed. “You definitely don’t have a silver tongue. But if you’re trying to apologize, Jao, it’s rejected, because you don’t need to apologize at all.” She wagged a finger. “And don’t try it again, okay?”

“I promise,” he smiled ruefully.

Azlyn returned to the cockpit with AG-37 and Sauk in tow. The assassin droid said in his ever-calm voice, “Hello, Jao. It’s good to see you well. Miss Rae reports you have joined us at Zonama Sekot.”

“We got the coordinates from Skywalker. Did they drag you into this too, Sauk? I thought you were retired.”

The Mon Cal gave an embarrassed shrug. “I was getting a little bored, actually.”

Ania laughed again. Maybe it was a side effect of the drugs wearing off but she felt lightheaded, even giddy. More likely, it came from seeing her friends back together again.

“Have any of our ships gone down to the planet yet?” asked Jao.

“Not yet,” answered Azlyn. “Remember, Zonama Sekot is supposed to be under quarantine to protect from Maladi’s virus.”

“I thought that would have burned through the galactic population by now. Wasn’t it designed to have a short life span to prevent mutations?”

"In theory, yes, but we don't have the equipment on-hand to check. Besides, I think the Tho Yor is what we really brought Sekot to meet."

"Does that mean there's really a..." Jao searched for the word. "A *soul* of a Jedi in there?"

"I don't think any of us would know," Ania said. "But Khat Lah and Cade seem to think so. And Mom."

"She's with you too?"

"We got a little separated. She's on the Vong flyer now."

"But everyone got off Bavinyar safe? Even the empress?"

Marasiah wouldn't like being called that, but Ania let it pass. "She's on the flyer too."

Jao let that process for a moment. "What do you think the Tho Yor can do here?"

"Like I said, you're asking the wrong people. Right now, we're all in waiting mode." She added a smile, "Which is fine by me, since we're in the clear now. So let's sit tight and wait for instruction. Maybe I'll even see you groundside."

"I'd like that." Jao smiled back. "As long as you're safe, I'm happy."

Ania felt the tiniest flush. "Good to know. Now, you'd better go inform your ship-mates."

"I will. I'll talk to you later."

The holo winked out. Ania closed the transmission and pivoted her chair to face the others. AG-37's face was as unreadable as always, but Sauk's was tilted curiously and Azlyn's had a tight smirk.

"What?" Ania asked.

"Don't worry about it," said Azlyn. "If we *are* going to hurry up and wait, we might as well eat something. This ship has a galley, don't it?"

Ania realized she was getting hungry too. "It does, and A-gee is a pretty decent chef, believe it or not. Or we can grab something quick, but personally, I haven't had a filling, non-toxic-filled meal in I-don't-know-how-long, so I'm in the mood for-"

She was interrupted by a flurry of light. Pure-white fans of energy flashed out from behind AG-37. Before the droid could react, a slash of sparks erupted across his neck, another down his right shoulder a third down his left. Pieces of him clattered

to the deck but AG's torso still tried to twist around. Then a fourth, final lightsaber blow slashed from shoulder to opposite hip and the droid crashed, smoking and sparking, to the deck.

Ania sprung up and reached for her weapon, only to realize she hadn't had one since her capture. An invisible hand picked her off her feet and hurled her hard into a wall; her head smacked bulkhead and stars filled her vision.

When they cleared, she saw Sauk fly into the opposite wall and collapse. Azlyn was closest to the intruder- a figure in black with a white blade- but with the wave of an arm he tossed her into the doorframe. The intruder spun into view and Ania knew him. Without drugs plaguing her system she recognized him as the one who'd tortured her and wrested Milagro's location from her mind.

Azlyn struggled for him but Eli Horn prodded the tip of his lightsaber toward the respirator on her chest. He snarled, "I don't want to kill you, but I will if you make me."

Azlyn stopped struggling and held her hands up. Ania used the distraction to creep closer to Eli. If she could get behind him and grab him around the neck, they might have a chance.

But Eli knew that. From his belt he plucked a small blaster, one of Ania's own, and pumped a shot into Azlyn's stomach. She dropped and Ania lunged. Eli's Force-enhanced speed was too much. She barely got her hands on him when the blue bolt took her in the chest and numbness swallowed her whole.

Eli stood, panting, over the bodies in the cockpit. The cramped space was full of them. The Mon Calamari lay on his shoulder, bruised bulbous head on the deck. Azlyn Rae was slumped half-upright by the door. Ania Solo was at his feet and had fallen over one of the assassin droid's cut-off arms.

Eli examined the machine first. He'd only managed to take it from behind by sneaking around the corner. He'd planned this strike in detail and was relieved that decapitation, followed by severing limbs and slashing the torso, had been the proper way to dispose of the dangerous opponent.

The others would wake up eventually, so he set to work on them first. Dragging them by the legs to rear of the ship was easy thanks to the smoothness of the deck. He'd found no stun cuffs aboard but extra power cables were sufficient to bind



their ankles and wrists. Once all three of them were secure, Eli went back into the cockpit, cleared out the wreckage of the assassin droid, and activated the comm system.

He'd have to rig the thing to feign malfunction if anyone else tried to call, but he needed to get out one message first. After being abandoned on Bavinyar he had no love for Hogrum Chalk, but he'd had none at the start of their partnership either. The regent saw him as an unpredictable liability and might even be right to. It didn't matter. Eli's one and only goal hadn't changed in three years. Now, at Zonama Sekot, he was on the brink of final success or utter failure.

He'd memorized Chalk's personal emergency frequency and entered it into *Free Agent's* comm console. Even though the regent hated Eli, he'd surely bring every ship he could muster to kill the Tho Yor. Maybe, once that was accomplished, he'd wash away Eli, too with a rain of turbolaser fire.

Eli decided he didn't mind. The Force had to be silenced, and he'd long ago accepted his life as an acceptable price to pay.

Marin was relieved to discover that Khat Lah's organic flyer contained a few scraps of recognizable technology. Though the ship's primary communication tools were a villip and the pilot's cognition hood, it also contained a small, long-range, wonderfully artificial transmitter system. The thing was sealed in a closet at the rear of the ship, as though banished for blasphemy, but Marin knew from one look at its metal-box frame and touch-pad controls that it would suit her purposes.

The only question was whether Sora Auchs would reply to her hail. She waited for two long minutes before the blunt bald face of a Chev male appeared before her. She explained who she was and that she needed to speak with Black Spear Company's commander. Then the holo went blank.

Marin waited for another five minutes, just long enough to consider giving up, before Sora Auchs appeared before her. The woman tilted her head thoughtfully and said, "I wasn't expecting to hear from you again."

"I'm sorry if it's an unpleasant surprise."

"Just a surprise. I take it you escaped with that weird object?"

"That's right."

"And the object was the reason we were hired in the first

place, the reason you wouldn't tell us about."

"Right gain."

Sora crossed her arms. "Are you calling now to officially terminate the contract?"

"Actually, I was hoping to re-up. If you're willing and capable. What's the situation at Bavinyar?"

She snorted, but seemed more amused than angry. "You ask that hours after running out on us?"

Marin resigned to take a tongue-lashing. They needed help and Sora was still her best bet. "I've been busy myself. But that doesn't matter. The mission we hired you for still stands. That object needs protecting, now more than ever, since Chalk's looking hard for it."

"Does he know your location?"

"No, and I realize I'm running a risk by even giving it to you. But if you *do* betray us to Chalk, I swear I'll use whatever time I have left to send a message to my family on Mandalore, and they'll spread what you've done to every corner of the galaxy."

"Blackmail? That's a very *Sith* kind of tool." The word stung; Sora went on, "I could also just turn you down. No hard feelings. It's just business."

"You can, but then you won't get paid more."

"Are the rebels still good for the money?"

"If they aren't, I am. I raised plenty of credits for my war against your father." It was risky even bringing that up, but Sora took it without flinching. "If this succeeds, I'll give it back to you. All of it."

"How much?"

Marin named the total of her liquid assets, which had been masterfully inflated for over a decade by a Hutt friend of long standing. Sora's eyes went wide. "You'd give us that much?"

"I'm getting old." She smiled tightly. "I'm running out of time to spend it."

"I want a guarantee."

"I'll send you a deposit. But first, my original question: What's happening at Bavinyar?"

"If you'd called two hours ago, I'd have said we were fully locked down. But the Federation is gone."

"Gone?" Marin blinked. "All of them? The whole fleet?"

"They all withdrew. I thought they'd leave a destroyer or two

to interdict us and the BDF, but they just ran. They left both our fleets unmolested.”

“You mean you can just leave?”

“They laid a few minefields on the way out, but they did it too fast. Sloppy things. The BDF’s already clearing them out.”

Marin hadn’t expected Chalk to move so quickly. He might have been racing back to Coruscant to head off an uprising in the Senate. Or he might be coming for them.

Pointedly she asked, “If I give you an initial deposit from my personal credit account, will you bring your ships to the location I specify?”

“The objective?”

“Same as before. Protect the object. We call it a Tho Yor.”

The younger woman didn’t care what it was called. Sora frowned thoughtfully. “My father would spin in his grave if he knew I was making a contract with you.”

“Your father was a true Mandalorian. He didn’t need a grave, just the *manda’yaim*. And a fat contract, if he could get one.”

Sora’s expression softened. “Do you really believe that?”

Marin was well aware that Yaga had been declared *dar’manda* for his crimes. She also knew that ban had been passed on to Sora. Putting honesty into her voice she said, “He valued family above everything else. I heard he even protected you with his last breath. *Aliit ori’an*. So yes, I do think he was Mando.”

Something flickered across Sora’s face; a burst of static or a tear. Then she said, “All right old woman, you’ll get your guns. But I want payment up front.”

Marin smiled. She was happy to give.

Kyra had never doubted her purpose in fighting for the rebels. Hopeless as the fight was, she charged on, using her mastery of the Force to advance its cause the best she could. The Force didn’t solve every problem but it gave her an edge over other beings and she couldn’t just ignore that. She had to do right by the incredible gift she’d been given.

That was still true, but somewhere along the line she’d made a mistake. While she’d been using her Force powers to rescue Gar Stazi, a total stranger, her friend Ania had been captured by the enemy. And Kyra hadn’t even known.

She felt sick at the thought she might never see Ania again. The older woman had rescued her from Rav and debt slavery on Socorro. She'd opened Kyra's eyes to the breath and possibility of the universe and given sage advice when Kyra'd needed it most.

She owed Ania more than she could put into words, and she'd utterly failed to pay back the debt.

Kyra knew she couldn't just rush off and save Ania, Force powers or no. She had no idea where her friend was and the resistance fleet was rushing towards Bavinyar besides. Anger, anxiety, recrimination and impatience all ate at her during the too-long journey. Kyra tried to distract herself by joining Asaak Dan in a sparring match and by visiting Ganner Krieg as the wounded man floated in his bacta tank, but that only did so much.

And then, when they were just hours away from Bavinyar, she was called to *Paramount's* situation room. She hurried from the carrier's recreation deck to the chamber just aft of the bridge, walking quickly and outright sprinting when the corridors were empty. She was still bursting with anxious energy when she stepped into the chamber and saw Starets, Sukharr, and Anj all standing before the holo-display in the center of the room. A set of four glowing electric faces were turned toward them, and Kyra hurried around to the front of the projector to see Jao and Saarai. The bearded human must have been Yalta Val and the Mon Calamari was Senator Gahan.

Kyra wanted to bleat out to Jao how sorry she was she hadn't gone with them to Coruscant, even after he'd made the offer, and how she'd do anything to save Ania, but Saarai was currently speaking.

"We've gotten confirmation from the mercenaries that they've entirely withdrawn from Bavinyar. Only the BDF is still there," the Chagrian was saying.

"Good," said Sukharr. "That matches our reports."

"I'm sorry I'm late," Kyra interjected. "But did you say the Bavinyar stand-off is *over*?"

"Chalk and his ships already left," Anj summarized. "Nobody's got a clue where they've gone."

"But what happened?" She looked straight at Jao. "What about the Tho Yor?"

“The Tho Yor is with us,” he said. “We’re sending the coordinates with this message, and an invitation to join you.”

“Where are you now, then?”

“The star system doesn’t have a name. But the planet’s called Zonama Sekot.”

Kyra felt dizzy. Everything was changing fast, again, and her mind couldn’t keep up. “You brought the Tho Yor there?”

“That’s right. I think they’re... getting to know each other right now.”

“And you think, together, they can...” She couldn’t get herself to say *bring back the Force*.

“I don’t know. What’s happening now is well beyond me. But we could use defending. Marin says she’s called in Black Spear Company. I hope they get here in time.”

“You mean, in case Chalk is coming.”

As Jao nodded seriously, the doors to the situation room opened. Stazi walked in on long strides, looking frankly resplendent in his Alliance admiral’s uniform. Kyra and the others shuffled away from the holo so he could stand directly in front of it.

Stazi’s mere appearance mustered surprised noises from Jao and Val, a relieved sigh from Saarai, and a salute from Senator Gahan.

“Admiral, sir,” the Mon Cal said, “It’s very good to see you hale.”

“It’s good to see *you*, Monia. It’s good to see you all.”

Anj stepped in to summarize the situation once again. Stazi’s eyes went wider with each revelation, especially when he heard the name Zonama Sekot.

“It seems we are working with forces that are... quite beyond my understanding,” the Duros admitted.

“Chalk may be coming for Zonama now,” Jao said. “Please, Admiral, this planet could need defenders.”

“I’d heard that world could defend itself. Or are those just stories?”

“Sir... Your guess is as good as mine.”

Stazi snorted. “Well, Master Assam, I give you credit for honesty.”

“What do we do?” asked Sukharr. “Change course for Zonama Sekot?”

Without hesitation the admiral said, "Yes. Give the order to the whole fleet."

Kyra was pleased by his quick response. Captain Starets did a quick calculation and reported an ETA of nine hours, more than Kyra would have liked, but at least they were on their way.

Stazi took Anj and Sukharr aside to begin planning strategy, and for a moment Kyra was alone in front of the holo. She looked down at it and tried to find the words she needed to say. "Jao... I heard about what happened on Coruscant. I am so, *so* sorry I didn't go with you. I thought getting Stazi back took precedence over everything."

"Kyra, it's all right."

She shook her head violently. "No. I never should have done that. Ania wasn't there when I should have helped her—"

"Kyra, wait."

"And that is *my* fault." Her voice choked. "I'll do anything to get her back. We'll do it together."

But Jao's face turned to smiling. "Kyra, we *have* Ania back. We rescued her on Bavinyar."

And yet again, Kyra's world flipped around. "She's safe?"

"It's a long story, but yes, she's on *Free Agent* right now. She's got A-gee and Sauk with her."

"Oh... Oh, Jao, that's amazing." Weak with relief, she braced herself against the comm console. A giddy, wheezing laugh escaped her. "I think I might be able to sleep again."

"Then rest up before you hit Zonama Sekot. There's no telling what things will be like when you get here."

"Right. Maybe I can call *Free Agent* too."

"I actually just got a message from them. Their main transceiver's down. Something about damage they took fleeing Bavinyar." He gave a tiny shrug. "But you'll see her yourself soon enough."

Unknown threats darkened her thoughts. "I hope so."

"Be a little confident," Jao said, smiling again. "After today, I think it's safe to say the Force really is with us."

As the *Jagged Fel*'s helm officer counted down reversion to realspace, Hogrum Chalk stepped all the way to the forward viewport. For once he didn't care what the ship's crew thought

as they watched him. His heart pounded blood in his ears and his whole body tensed. Though he'd done everything to abjure the Force and its mystical thinking, it felt as though his destiny would be decided in the next few minutes.

When the count reached zero hyperspace disappeared. Stars filled the viewport, and in its center sat a single emerald sphere. As Eli had promised, this was Zonama Sekot.

Though Hogrum wished he could reject the stories about this planet as mere legend, he knew he had to take them seriously. They said it could muster the raw power of the Force itself to create luminous, deadly coronas that defended better than any planetary shield. With a thought, the living world could wipe out an entire fleet.

Hogrum didn't plan to win a war against Zonama Sekot. He didn't even want to fight it. All he cared about was the Tho Yor. He stalked over to the tactical station and asked, "Have you located the object?"

"We have, sir," said Captain Worgaan. "It's holding steady in mid-level orbit. It appears to be guarded by the same craft that escaped Bavinyar with it."

"Has it reacted to our presence?"

"Not yet, sir. None of them have."

"Good. Comm, get me Admiral Yage."

By the time Hogrum got to the comm station, the lieutenant had already made the connection with *War Hammer*. Rulf Yage didn't wait to be addressed before saying, "Regent, are we still ordered to destroy that object?"

"The Tho Yor, Admiral." There was no point in hiding the name. "That is your highest priority. Designate all available ships to its destruction."

Yage had brought three star destroyers and a wealth of support ships with him, and that didn't even count the *Jagged Fel*. Their target was a handful of freighters and one ancient ark. Such a force would have seemed like overkill in any other circumstance; now Hogrum wondered if it would be enough.

Before Yage could say so, Hogrum reminded, "Your ships hit and damaged the Tho Yor at Bavinyar. It is not invincible. The *Jagged Fel* destroyed one in a previous encounter. You may sustain losses but you will attack until it is destroyed. Is that clear?"

“Yes, sir. But there is another issue. According to our charts, there should be no habitable planet in this star system. “

“The planet is Zonama Sekot. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

It took Yage a moment to recover from his shock. “I’d thought that world was lost in the Unknown Regions, sir. The stories say it’s capable of... many things.”

“I understand your concern. Strike quickly, before the planet can muster its defenses.”

That was call for Yage to sign off, but the admiral hesitated. “Sir, I must ask, is this *truly* our first priority? With Gar Stazi’s escape, surely the rebels are our biggest concern.”

Hogrum has never seen such impudence from Yage. “All that has changed is that the rebels now have one escaped criminal in their ranks, one who, I might add, has been completely unaware of the strategic situation in this galaxy for three years. Our other fleets can handle that pitiful threat. *Yours* will handle this one. Do you understand?”

Finally he got the point. “Yes, sir. *War Hammer* will lead the attack.”

“Good. The *Jagged Fel* with join you.”

Yage nodded, the only sign of approval he’d gotten the whole conversation. The holo turned off and Hogrum relayed the attack order to Worgaan. On the captain’s signal, the *Jagged Fel* began to accelerate toward Zonama Sekot. The Tho Yor was still too far away to be seen but Hogrum knew it was out there. He could feel it as surely as if he had the Force again.

He watched the tactical holo and saw, to his relief, that Yage’s ships were moving ahead too. Four star destroyers and their support craft against such a tiny target seemed ludicrous, but Hogrum would spare no effort. He didn’t know what his enemies hoped for in bringing the Tho Yor to the living world, only that if he failed to stop them, everything he’d built would collapse.

As the fleet fell in deeper toward the planet, Hogrum watched the tactical holo. Despite the doom veering on them, the Tho Yor and its guardian ships didn’t flee. Hogrum saw it first with scorn, then with suspicion.

And then the tactical lieutenant announced, “Sirs, we’ve picked up new vessels. They’d dropped out of hyperspace behind us.”



“How many ships?” asked Worgaan.

“Scans show... six, sir. They appear to be the mercenaries from Bavinyar.”

“Send one star destroyer to hold them off,” Hogrum ordered. “Everyone else, attack the Tho Yor!”

His booming command sent the crew hurrying to comply. The mercenary ships would be a handful for one destroyer, but he’d spare no more than necessary to destroy the Tho Yor before it and Zonama Sekot enacted whatever they had planned.

He’d come so close to victory, so close. He’d never let vermin mercenaries steal the future from his grasp.

Time was a strange thing, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, always moving forward to one end yet for every life it seemed to have a different trajectory. Tasha Ryo was still getting used to it after millennia of seclusion.

She knew that her time had run out.

Tasha sensed no animosity from the fleet veering down on her; in the Force its crew mixed confusion and solid resolve. Nonetheless, she knew they’d come to destroy her. She remembered, after so many millennia, the pain as her previous Tho Yor shells had been overwhelmed and destroyed. So it would be here, and the breaking agony would be the last thing she’d feel before total oblivion.

After twenty-five thousand years, Tasha was mortal after all.

Unless Khat Lah was right, and Zonama Sekot could save her. The living planet had not reached out to her since their first contact, so she reached out to it. In the Force she told it, *The time has come. Are you ready?*

*As I ever could be,* said the living world.

Tasha plunged. Leaving her guardian starships behind, her Tho Yor fell toward Zonama faster than even gravity could pull. Ablative friction flared around her black-stone shell but she felt no heat. Instead she felt Sekot reeling her in, not just toward its surface but a specific location.

*This is the place where I am strongest,* it said. *Here is where I- the planetary consciousness- first awoke. It is the place where I first experienced pain and knew evil.*

And from the agony of birth had come a magnificent being,

the likes of which the galaxy had not seen in hundreds of thousands of millennia. Tasha fell and Sekot caught her. Without her even willing, the Tho Yor slowed its descent. Cushioned by atmosphere, lifted by the Force, it was guided deliberately to the peak of a single mountain rising high above all others in its range. Snow dusted its slopes but the top was bald, and scattered clouds drifted beneath its summit. When the Tho Yor stopped its lowest edge hovered just meters above the peak.

Tasha could feel the agony of combat high above. Whether those dying meant to harm her or save her, she couldn't know. Sekot had enveloped her fully. She'd forgotten the feeling of warm embrace until now.

*Are you ready?* the living world asked.

*As I ever could be.*

She had always craved transcendence. Tasha Ryo had been born twenty-five thousand years ago on Shikaakwa, her mother a Je'daii Master and her father a petty crime baron. From that awkward and unhappy union she had been born, and for her short mortal life Tasha's parents had warred over her, each trying to make her in their image.

To her the Force had not just been a tool, or even a guide. She'd imagined it as a gateway to an existence beyond such petty things.

Tasha had stepped through one gate when she'd allowed herself to be subsumed into the Tho Yor at Anil Kesh. Her sacrifice had breathed life into the great arks and allowed them to defend Tython from the Rakata, saving the nascent Je'daii Order.

Now she was about to step through an even greater door, and make a greater sacrifice.

She'd never have been able to go through on her own. She had the knowledge granted to her by the Tho Yor and the Ones who'd made it, but not the power. Sekot provided what she'd lacked. The living world funneled all of its incalculable strength into the single luminous point that was Tasha Ryo, and it lifted her up.

The Tho Yor remained on the mountaintop. Tasha rose not as a physical being but as pure Force. She'd been trapped in limbo between mortal and transcendent but now, finally, she

could touch the Cosmic Force and exist as the Whills did. To do it required Sekot to punch through the barrier, but once it was broken, everything was down to her.

Tasha allowed herself to surrender everything: the joys and pains of mortality, the memory of her parents and Je'daii friends, the natural beauty of Tython and the strange joy of spreading her conscious wide in the Tho Yor. As the Father of Mortis had taught her, she allowed herself to exist as a being of pure light, beyond any need for physical form.

Though there was no one there to see it, and Tasha herself was too enraptured to care, the black-stone surface of the Tho Yor glowed from inside until it became a luminous crystal. The light grew so bright it became a second sun. Raw energy, shed by Tasha's ascendance, reverberated through the Living Force. Sekot shifted its power to capturing the energy, sustaining it for as long as it could, but even as it did so the living world gave Tasha a final push.

The consciousness that she'd been was already firmly placed into the Cosmic Force. She felt the minds of the Whills around her, divided but unified, shocked and curious toward the new arrival.

And she felt something else too, a power beyond even the Cosmic Force. It was on another plane, walled off by another barrier, but she knew it was there. Through she had no body, and that plane had no time or space, she felt like she was being physically drawn to it.

*It is the ultimate wellspring, Sekot told her. That is the heart of the Force.* Its voice seemed distant, still trapped on a lower plane. Tasha was surprised to hear it at all.

*What lies beyond the Cosmic Force?* she asked.

*I have heard it called the Unifying. I cannot take you there, but I've shown you where to find it.*

*But how? You're still a being of the Living.*

*A Skywalker showed me once, a long time ago...*

Before she could ask more, she felt Sekot fade away. The breach it had made was not fully closed, but the living world devoted all its energy to keeping the gap between Living and Cosmic Force open as long as it could.

As for Tasha, she had passed out of limbo from one plane to another, and there was no going back. But her role was not

over. She remembered all of the mad, desperate, beautiful plan as explained by Khat Lah, and she knew more was to come.

And though she was removed forever from time and space, Tasha Ryo still knew how to wait.

On the mountaintop she'd left behind, the Tho Yor had dissolved into light. No trace of the ancient ark remained; its matter had all been converted to raw Force energy, left behind by Tasha's transformation and sustained by Sekot's concentrated effort.

To the outside eyes which would see it soon, the eruption manifested as a single pillar of light rising from the mountain peak.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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High-altitude winds buffeted *Free Agent* and Eli struggled to maintain straight flight with the unfamiliar controls. Nonetheless, he managed to direct the ship in a steady dive, following the path *Mynock* blazed into Zonama's atmosphere. The two freighters, along with the Sekotan flyer and two more shuttles, were all tracing the path of the falling Tho Yor.

Even from a far distance, Eli could feel the seismic shift in the Force. His heart filled with fear that the Tho Yor had already accomplished whatever it had come here to do, and his quest to silence the Force was already defeated.

And then, from high above and through thin cloud-streaks, Eli saw light spearing skyward from a mountaintop. An eruption of raw Force energy, as he'd seen on that planet at the galaxy's heart. A gateway, a bridge, a ladder to another plane.

It filled him with dread and hope.

"Hold position here!" Khat Lah's voice said over *Free Agent*'s still-active comm. "Let me try to contact Sekot before setting down!"

After putting *Free Agent* into a slow circle around the mountaintop he tapped out a quick affirmative. He'd already told the other ships that his comm was malfunctioning and he could only transmit short text-based messages. With everything else going on nobody had asked further. He knew the excuse would only buy him a short amount of time, but that was all he'd need.

Eli brought the actual comm system online and hailed Chalk on his priority channel. The regent's stern face appeared in holographic form again.

"You need to send troops down here immediately," Eli snapped.

"What happened to the Tho Yor?" asked Chalk. "We've entered lower orbit but haven't found anything on our scanners."

"The Tho Yor.... ascended."

"What? What does that mean?"

"The Tho Yor isn't *here* anymore. Look for an energy emission on a mountaintop near my location. Use visual scanners if you have to. *That's* what we need to land troops around. Cordon it off. Don't let anyone get near."

Chalk sidestepped out of the holo for a second, then back in. "We can bombard the mountain from orbit and turn it to slag."

"I don't think you can. This eruption is like what I saw on that ancient planet, the one I told you about. It's pure energy and connects to the higher planes of the Force. I can't go inside it but Skywalker can. Send landing craft. Send TIEs. We have to secure the mountaintop!"

For once Chalk didn't argue. "I'll deploy forces to your position. Is Skywalker down there with you?"

"Yes. All four of them."

"Then you have to take care of them now."

"I will."

"I can't promise my troops can land. Zonama Sekot might intervene."

"It hasn't yet."

"Yes, I've noticed." Chalk sounded curious.

"Regent... I think I feel something, a strain... I think Sekot is struggling to keep the eruption going. It's throwing so much energy into kindling the flame it might not be able to defend itself."

"You'd better be right. Support teams are launching now. I'm sending two battalions."

"Make sure they're ready for high-altitude, low-temp operations."

"They will be. Make things ready on *your* end, Master Horn."

"Understood. I won't fail again."

Eli killed the connection. If Chalk was launching now it would be five to ten minutes before the landing craft arrived to

secure the mountaintop, but their approach would be marked much sooner. Taking firm grasp of *Free Agent*'s controls once more, Eli was forced to make a choice. He'd hidden among the Skywalkers so far but they'd discover his duplicity within moments. He needed to use surprise while he still had it.

His mind ran through quick calculations. The two Jedi Masters in their little shuttle could do nothing with the eruption, nor could whoever was aboard the Mon Cal ship. The danger came solely from Skywalkers. From the comm chatter he'd learned Marasiah and Marin were aboard Khat Lah's flyer; Cade was aboard his own *Mynock*. His gut told him Cade was the most dangerous but the flyer had a pair of Skywalkers and any of the three might enter the eruption and perhaps awaken the Force.

There was another complication. The Sekotan flyer was propelled and defended by Yuuzhan Vong dovin basals. The miniature singularities were always active, and the living ship's brain was constantly operating them. *Mynock*, by contrast, had electrically-generated energy fields for protection.

A glance at his scanners told Eli that those shields were currently down.

That decided him. With gentle nudges, he decelerated *Free Agent* and brought it directly behind Skywalker's ship. The big ugly freighter continued to fly its slow circle around the mountaintop. It attempted no evasive maneuvers and didn't raise shields. Skywalker was totally unaware. Even his vaunted Force was giving him no warning.

Eli checked weapons controls and armed both concussion missiles and laser turrets. After he destroyed *Mynock* he'd have to move quickly to destroy Khat Lah's flyer. Maybe he'd succeed before Chalk's reinforcements came, maybe he'd be shot down himself. Either way, he had to try.

As his thumb settled on the trigger a voice crackled over the comm. "I've got a buttload of hostiles headed our way," said Jariah Syn. "We got a plan or what?"

Eli gave him answer. Two concussion missiles shot out of *Free Agent*'s ventral launcher and streaked right toward *Mynock*. He'd fired from such close range the freighter barely had room to dodge. Yet it tried; Skywalker's Force-enhanced reflexes allowed him to juke and drop altitude, wrenching the

ungainly ship into maneuvers that should have been impossible.

But it wasn't enough. The missiles' proximity sensors detonated them just meters above *Mynock*. The first ripped off its port-side wing. The second tore off the upper half of its massive engine. The freighter immediately started falling, trailing a massive pillar of black smoke. Eli didn't relent. Taking control of the laser cannons, he sprayed hot plasma bolts into *Mynock's* hull. More explosions peppered the ship. He could feel the heart-stopping panic of the ship's crew as it plummeted flaming from the sky. Eli pulled upward, leaving it to dwindle beneath and finally slam into the mountainside.

Eli couldn't tell if they'd all been killed. He couldn't afford to check in the Force; Khat Lah's flyer was diving toward him and releasing the first of its volcanic Yuuzhan Vong missiles. Eli wrenched his ship skyward and, in his panic, forgot where the turn on the shield generators. The molten warheads didn't track as well as his own missiles had but the second clipped *Free Agent's* port-most engine. The freighter stuttered and began falling toward the mountain, while another ship, the Mon Cal shuttle that had joined late, rushed him from the starboard flank. Eli frantically shunted power to the other thrusters to regain altitude, then grabbed weapon controls and began spraying bolts at the shuttle, which splattered on its shields.

That was when the howl of TIE fighters filled the thin air. Two dozen Predators fell through the sky, flying vanguard for five boxy assault landers. The Mon Cal shuttle immediately veered away, chased by a half-dozen TIEs. Khat Lah's ship attempted evasives and Eli watched as the nimble flyer dodged laser bolts with impressive grace, and those it could not dodge its dovin basals neatly swallowed.

But even that ship was not invincible. The odds were simply too high against it. TIEs mobbed it; the dovin basals were overwhelmed and its beautifully smooth green hull became pocked with laser-blasts.

Eli swung *Free Agent* around to track its fall with his eyes as well as sensors. The organic ship swung into a curve and disappeared behind the side of the mountain, but it had fallen well beneath the peak and on the opposite side as *Mynock's*



crash site. He checked his scanners and found the Jedi shuttle no longer on them, while the Mon Cal one was trailing smoke and being harried far from the mountain.

Suddenly it was just him and Chalk's forces in the air. Eli realized, with mild surprise, that the regent hadn't ordered them to shoot them down too. He set the comm system to broadcast on all frequencies and said, "This is Eli Horn aboard the freighter designated *Free Agent*. Do not, repeat do *not* fire."

A crisp voice replied, "This is Colonel Rayez of the One-Hundred Second Infantry Division. We copy, Master Horn. We've been commanded to put ourselves at your disposal."

That was a pleasant surprise. Eli dropped altitude and edged his ship closer to the mountaintop. The spear of light still stretched skyward from the peak, and scanned the surrounding terrain for a good place to set down. There weren't many, for steep slopes descended from all sides, but he spotted one snow-dusted talus field and lowered toward it. As that section of the mountaintop came into better view he noted ancient ruins, wind-worn and snow-dusted, scattered across the small flat land.

"Colonel Rayez," he said, "Begin aerial deployment. I'll assist in creating a cordon around the peak. I also have prisoners aboard that need to be secured. No one is to touch that light. It will *kill* you. Do you understand?"

He surely didn't, but Rayez said "Yes sir."

"And one more thing," Eli added. It was probably the most important. "Send teams to secure the crash sites for both downed ships."

"Yes, sir. What should we do with survivors?"

For a moment Eli's heart wavered. He'd tried so far to avoid taking lives; merciless slaughter was a habit of the Sith, not him. Yet the stakes were so high now. He had one Skywalker trussed in his hold, the other three unaccounted for. Any one of them could reawaken the Force.

There was no room for mercy, not this time.

He said, "Kill them, Colonel. Kill them all."

Cade had managed to stay conscious through *Mynock's* crash, barely. Through panic and confusion, slamming g-forces, wailing alarms and streaming smoke, he'd been able to

reach into the Force and do what *Mynock's* exploded engine and dead repulsors couldn't.

He had grabbed hold of the falling ship and slowed it for the crucial seconds before impact. Yet when they hit the mountain it was still jarringly violent. The first part of *Mynock* to hit solid earth was the wreckage of its port wing. The twisted metal stub jammed into a rock and the freighter's body snapped into the steep mountainside. Its blunt nose smashed into hard rock; concussive impact tore shatter-lines through the transparisteel viewport and nearly broke through, crushing everyone in the cockpit.

Cade's crash restraints were the only thing that kept his head from being broken across the remains of viewport. They'd finally come to a stop but the lights had all gone out, even the red alarm-beacons, and the air smelled like smoke. The only illumination came through the broken window, soft and snow-pale. Cade fumbled to release himself from the pilot's chair, then twisted back to see his passengers. Jariah was removing himself from the co-pilot's seat. Talon was stirring back to consciousness in hers. R2-D2 had been plugged into the power socket on the rear wall, which had anchored him in place during the crash. The droid hooted woefully and Cade could hear C-3PO's moaning from somewhere further back.

He was about to make a cocky remark about his crash-landing skills when he saw Deliah. She was slumped in her chair unmoving, pretty head tilted to one side. First he saw the speck of blood trailing from her opened mouth, and then he saw the piece of shrapnel that just torn through the beside her and jabbed into her abdomen.

"Blue!" he cried and leaped from his seat.

Cade crouched over her, touched her face, and felt her with the Force. Her presence was there but already so faint, and when he examined her further he felt that the shrapnel had town deep into her gut, slicing vital organs.

"Ah, no, no, no," he repeated, and tried to find the strength to heal her.

He'd done it before. For everyone else he had to draw on the power of the dark side to mend their broken bodies but for Deliah alone he could use the light. He'd cured her of Darth Maladi's vicious infection on Wayland and he could do it

again, but in his panic he could barely remember how.

He focused on memory. Images flashed through his head, replaying all the times he'd stayed with her despite his self-loathing attempts to push her away. She'd loved him when the whole galaxy was turned against him and when he couldn't stand himself. She'd loved him whether he was a bounty hunter, a death stick junkie, an assassin or a Jedi Knight chasing across the galaxy on damn fool crusades. She'd been true blue, every step of the way.

He'd never figured out why. He prayed he'd still have the chance.

Holding all those memories close, Cade set to heal her. First he put a hand on the shrapnel buried inside her. He faintly heard Jariah warn him but he yanked the metal out anyway. He felt more pain fill Deliah's body- felt it as though it were his own- but he bore that pain for her, taking it into himself. Cade could handle pain; he'd been through a lifetime's worth. He stared deep inside her and found the torn tissue and scorched cells, and drawing solely on the Force's light side he pulled the gaps together and wove them tight again, commanding cell to bind to cell one after another.

As he healed Deliah he seemed to pass beyond time, so deep into the Force he was leaving their bodies behind. He felt that eruption of raw Force power trying to draw him near, beckoning as it had on the other side of Rohakalla's gate. He hadn't intended to let himself be sucked into the Cosmic Force back then and he didn't intend it now, but other options seemed to be dwindling. There had to be some other way to bring the Living Force back; he wasn't ready to give up on life yet.

When Cade felt he'd finally healed Deliah's worst wounds he withdrew from her body and from the Force. Energy fled him and he slumped onto the debris-strewn floor of *Mynock's* cockpit. When he looked up, Jariah went bent over Deliah, feeling her pulse.

"It's steady," he marveled. "You healed her."

"Yeah. I do that."

"You gotta teach me that one day, Cade."

"Really don't think I could. Listen-" With a groan he pushed himself off the floor. "I did what I could for Blue but she'd gonna need mending. Even if there ain't power in sick bay

there's still bandages, bacta injections, all that. I don't think we should move her. We gotta bring them up here."

"Yeah, if we can *get* to sick bay." Jariah looked down the black hallway snaking toward the ship's rear. He yelled, "Hey, Threepio! You dead yet?"

A tremulous voice replied, "It appears I am still functional, sir... Somehow."

"Good. Let's get some meds," said Cade, but as he started for the door Talon's hand lashed out and grabbed his arm.

He tried to tear it free but she held it tight. Still sitting in the passenger's chair, the Twi'lek raised her other hand and gestured to the cracked viewport. "It appears we have company."

Though the mountainside obscured most of their view, Cade could see the boots and calves of white-armored stormtroopers along the top of the window. "Oh, that's just fragging great," he sighed.

"Any chance we can just play dead?" asked Jariah.

"Not damn likely. They're here to finish us off."

Talon released him and pushed out of her chair. "We must take the fight to them."

He wanted to argue with her, but the witch was right. He looked at Deliah, wounded and unconscious in her chair, and yearned to remain with her. But that wasn't in the cards.

"Artoo," he said, "Stay with Blue. Watch her. Jariah, Talon, you're with me."

The droid whistled affirmative. The others moved quickly, gathering lightsabers and blasters. They stepped carefully through dark hallways to the airlock, which was sealed tight despite the concussive blow that had partly impacted the adjacent bulkhead. Cade wasn't sure if *Mynock* would ever fly again, and his heart went out to the ship his uncle had labored so hard on.

But survival was the first order of business. Cade used the Force to push the airlock open, letting in cold wind. He'd remembered to throw his black longcoat on and hoped that would be enough.

Cade reached out with the Force and sensed at least a full squad of soldiers, but none of them were near the airlock. To the others he whispered, "We come out blazing, got it? Talon,

you and me go on the offensive. Jariah, you hold here and pick 'em off with your blaster. Got it?"

"Got it," his friend said. Talon simply nodded.

With a push from the Force, Cade blew the airlock hatch open. With another he threw himself into the air, somersaulted, and landed boots-first on the snowy slope. He let the Force carry him further, guiding his feet and his blade as the nearest set of troopers took notice. Propelled by that wave, Cade sprinted toward them, deflected their blasts, sheared apart their rifles and Force-hurled them down the slope.

More soldiers came at him but Cade kept moving, weaving and jumping, barely thinking at all. He'd dropped easily into the Force again and a small part of him wondered if the eruption blazing upslope wasn't fueling him with its energy. Cade barreled into three more troopers and cut them down. Though he didn't see it, he was aware of Talon attacking her own foes without mercy. She had no Force to guide her and a few blaster bolts skimmed her shoulders painfully but she kept fighting, cutting down trooper after trooper. And Jariah, relying on instinct as much as his new power, crouched by the airlock and fired off precise sniping shots, sometimes picking off enemies coming at Talon and Cade from behind.

What a team they were, Cade thought with faint amazement.

When their enemies were all down the battle stopped and so did the current between them. Cade was panting hard and his lungs hurt; he realized how much a strain the cold, thin atmosphere was taking, and not even the Force could sustain him indefinitely.

"All right, back in the ship," Cade creaked. "Get us some air. Get Blue her medicine."

"Wait." Talon grasped his arm and pointed upslope. Rising ridges obscured the top but the bright eruption was easily visible. So, too, were the pair of Federation drop ships coming in to land.

"They will capture and hold that peak," she said. "We will lose our only chance to access the eruption. The Tho Yor will have sacrificed itself for nothing."

Cade wanted to argue, but he could feel Sekot's strain in the Force. The living planet's immense power was the only thing sustaining the bridge left behind by Tasha Ryo's ascension,

and it could not do so forever. Chalk's troopers would surround the thing and wait for it to die, while more spread across the mountain to exterminate anyone they found. The team sent to *Mynock* had been defeated but their failure would just mean another attempt.

Cade sagged from exhaustion. He felt totally outfought. Talon's vice-hold held him upright and she said, "We must act now, or we lose everything."

He wanted to shout that fine, they would lose everything. Let the eruption dwindle and let the Force stay silent. Let Tasha's sacrifice go to waste. But even if they stayed with *Mynock* to protect Deliah they'd find themselves facing wave after wave of troopers, and eventually raw numbers would overwhelm them.

He saw one path left, one he'd never wanted to take, because he knew there was only one end to it. But the only alternative was to surrender the Force to Chalk's minions, forever.

"Oh, damn it all," he sighed. Destiny had him in the end.

A curious tweet came from the airlock, and Cade saw R2-D2 peeking his metal dome into the cold. Jariah asked, "What happened, Artoo? Is Blue alright?"

The little droid replied that Deliah was stable for now but needed attention. He'd come out because he was curious.

"Get back in the ship, Artoo, and stay there." Cade waved the droid back toward *Mynock* and, reluctantly, he used his leg-jets to fly back inside. Cade followed, leading Jariah inside too, but Talon remained out in the cold. Ignoring her, the two men made their way back to the cockpit. Cade stopped at the crew lounge's supply cabinet on the way to bring out two respirator masks with portable air canisters.

"Are we really going back out there?" Jariah asked.

As they stepped into the cockpit Cade turned and grasped his shoulders. "Not you, brother. You gotta watch over Blue."

"Me? What, you think you're gonna run off and make me play doctor?"

"Better you than Threepio. Somebody's gotta do it."

"And what, you're gonna run out there with Miss Sith and head 'em off?"

"Basically." He tried a cocky grin he didn't feel. "Don't worry, I'll be back in no time."

“Dammit, listen-”

Cade pulled him in for hard embrace. He slapped Jariah’s back and said, “Don’t draw this out, you *vermo*. I ain’t aiming to die today.”

“You’d better not,” Jariah whispered as they pulled away.

Cade squatted next to Deliah, still unconscious in her chair. He cupped her face with one hand and used his thumb to brush away the blood trailing from her mouth. Then he leaned forward and kissed her lips, unresponsive but soft and warm. He wished she were awake to remember this. He wished he had some good parting words to give her. But there was no time for any of that. He could feel destiny pulling him again, up toward the bright mountain peak. It was destiny he’d never desired and he wanted to fight it, but there was no time for that either, no time for anything but action.

Beside him, R2-D2 hooted concern.

“All right, enough.” Cade stood tall. He hefted his blaster in one hand, the oxygen tanks in the other. His lightsaber dangled from his belt. “You guys man the fort. I got some business to take care of. Be back in a little while.”

They ascended the slope quickly, with long running strides. Oxygen from the portable tanks fueled their lungs but their bodies were propelled by something greater, up toward the flaring light-pillar at the summit.

It was not the Force. Talon was reasonably certain of that. Cade might have been drawing on it, but the power still denied her, even when its fountainhead blazed so close. Despite that, Talon felt stronger than she had since losing the Force, maybe even longer.

The eruption was a destination and goal. It was strength and purpose she’d been lacking for so long. The Dai Bendu elder had been correct; all this time she’d been an empty vessel but now she felt filled again. Even though she couldn’t hear the Force’s call she knew she was being beckoned, and knowledge alone gave her everything she needed.

They were halfway from the crash site to the peak when they encountered a squadron of troopers coming downslope, probably to investigate *Mynock*. Cade and Talon moved swiftly; though she could not sense him, Talon knew he felt her

and relied on him to watch her back as she cut down the soldiers. Some blasts she could deflect with her lightsaber; others were too fast and they skimmed her shoulders and legs, adding more pain, but even the blaze in her jagged nerves made her feel alive. And all the while Cade continued to battle; knowing that allowed her to move fearlessly through the fight.

A long time ago, during Cade's training in the Sith Temple, they'd joined in sparring matches against Krayt's war droids. The Force had bound their minds together during the fighting, allowing them to cooperate and defeat the deadly machines, but all the while Talon could sense he'd been hiding his reservations about joining the Sith. Now there was no such discord. United in single purpose, they battled as one until all their foes were strewn at their feet.

It was a union she'd never expected, but Talon was infinitely glad for it.

Taking a moment to re-affix the breath mask to his face, Cade asked, "Ready for Round Three?"

"Of course," she said.

"Good answer."

And he took off, using the Force to propel him fast up the slope. Talon knew she was being challenged and reveled in it. She charged after him with pumping legs and heaving lungs. As they rose higher the air grew even colder and the dusting of snow dissolved to reveal dried volcanic rock, alternately smooth and jagged. Using the rougher patches for footholds, Talon surged ahead and nearly caught up with Cade. The light-pillar seemed so close now, and as its base surged into view so did the cluster of stormtroopers gathered around to protect it.

There were scores of them. Twenty, thirty, even forty. Some were setting up heavy repeating blasters. Others were throwing down sandbag barricades around the eruption. And amongst them, giving commands, was a sole figure in black armor.

Eli Horn must have felt their presence in the Force, for he turned a half-circle to stare at them across the distance.

Wind stole the sound of his barked order, but Talon didn't need to hear it. She and Cade charged upward to meet the enemy. As she ran she felt her strides grow longer, her leaps higher, through no power of her own. Cade was using the Force to help her make the final ascent. That would have



wounded her pride once, but she was grateful now. Her self did not matter, only protecting the eruption and reawakening the Force.

That was her strength and her purpose, and with it Talon felt filled to overflow.

She charged one gun emplacement, knowing Cade would take care of the other. Stormtroopers dropped to their knees to fire. She twisted her blade in front of her, deflecting hails of laser bolts with fans of light. She jumped and danced and moved on pure instinct alone, taking the lives of those who'd take the Force from her. Yet as she battled she realized her motivation was not selfish. The power glowing at her back filled her with awe and she yearned to be of service to it, not to further some grand design like Lord Krayt's but simply for the act of serving. Her stand here would decide the fate of the galaxy forevermore, and it filled Talon with elation like a Sith could never know.

The Force was moving through her now, unfelt but certain. It propelled her over a group of kneeling soldiers and onto the ground beside the gun emplacement, which she cleaved in half with a two-handed downward saber-slash. Behind her, just meters away, beautiful empowering light exploded toward the sky. She wanted to turn and stare into it forever, but she couldn't, not while it still needed protecting, so she lunged toward the nearest cluster of enemies.

Fire was coming at her from all sides now. Though she danced and twisted and flashed her fans of light, laser bolts were getting past. They scorched her shoulders and arms; one bolt cracked into the right side of her hip and she staggered.

That was when Eli appeared. He lunged at her; white blade crashed against red and forced her down the slope. Surprise and the force of his attack knocked Talon off-balance; she lost footing and slid down. Still grasping her saber she used her free hand to arrest the fall but had still tumbled five or ten meters away from the peak and finally stopped on a section of flat snow-dusted ruins, on the cusp of a steeper drop.

Eli fell on her from above. Talon rolled to the cusp's edge and sprung to her feet. Even as his boots slapped stone Eli slashed at her with fury and desperation. All of his hesitancy from their previous encounters was gone. Her former apprentice was

determined to silence the eruption at any cost, just as Talon was determined to preserve it.

She realized she'd already given up on her life. That was fine; she'd been trained not to fear death from an early age. When the Force had deserted her she'd lost that resolve and shrunk from her inevitable end time and again, but now, finally, she knew the Force was with her.

So Talon went on the offensive. Without anger or hate in her heart she attacked her apprentice, smashing hard blows on his saber before half-stepping back and attempting a fast thrust at his abdomen. Eli twisted out of the way but it left a steaming scrape in his armor. Eli lashed wildly, one-handed, and Talon ducked to dodge. She swept at his knees; he used a Force-propelled jump to somersault over her head and land with his back to the edge, saber raised for another strike.

The Force moved through Talon, but Eli could command it. It was a simple fact that he would kill her. Talon accepted that; it didn't mean she had to lose. She surged upward, getting as close to him as she could before he brought the blade down. She caught the diagonal slash with her own and their weapons sizzled and sparked. Eli called on the Force to deliver a powerful slap to her face. It knocked her oxygen mask full off and her whole body twisted to one side. Eli slipped his lightsaber down, severing her blade-hand at the wrist. Scalding pain shot up her arm as hand and weapon both fell dead on the snow-dusted rock.

With her free hand, Talon grabbed the collar of Eli's armor and held herself upright. She saw the sorrow in his eyes, and also the resolve.

"Surrender," he rasped.

But Talon pulled herself close, impaling her body on Eli's half-lowered lightsaber. White light and awful pain seared through her abdomen and spread upward; darkness clouded the edges of her vision. Eli stared at his old master in shock and she did her best to hold his eyes.

Then, with her final strength, she hooked her leg around Eli's calf, brought it up behind his knee, and snapped it inward. Her apprentice collapsed to one side, lost balance, pitched over the cusp of the ledge and fell down the slope.

Talon didn't see it. She was beyond seeing anything except

the paleness of the sky. She lay on her back; the cold of old stone seemed to seep into her body, consuming everything.

Great pain gave way to greater numbness. She had only moments left. Talon wanted to die watching the eruption of light. She tried to twist her body but hadn't the strength. She strained her neck, rolling her head to one side, and finally caught the pillar with the edge of her vision.

It was beauty. It was strength and purpose. It was all she'd ever needed, and the last thing she ever saw.

In the midst of the fray, Cade's mind flashed back to a short quip he'd shared with Marasiah. She'd said *He can't take down two dozen stormtroopers, Skywalker. And neither can you.*

And he'd said, *Give me challenge, you never know what I can do.* But he hadn't really meant it.

He didn't know how many he was battling now, but it was more than two dozen. It felt like hundreds. This close to the eruption the Force was flowing through him with power like he'd never imagined, feeding him with energy and lifting his awareness to new heights, but numbers were still numbers. Blaster bolts were still blaster bolts and flesh was still flesh: torn, battered, burnt.

He could only hold back so much.

One blast skimmed his left shoulder, sending pain down that arm, but he could still wield his saber with his left. Another shot caught the back of his thigh, forcing him to call on the Force all the more to keep moving. He continued to jump and slash, cutting down soldiers after soldier, detecting incoming shots with the Force and bouncing them back as best he could.

But numbers were numbers, and though the Force was with him he was starting to falter.

Then Cade felt a distant shudder and knew that Talon was dying. Amazing that the thought would sadden him. It also meant he was on his own, and as he kept dancing and slashing and fighting he reached out with the Force, trying to locate Eli who was his greatest threat, but the young man wasn't anywhere nearby.

That still left him with so many stormtroopers. Cade knew he was winnowing them down. He danced across a stage of the dead. White-armored shells surrounded the eruption site like a

plasteel nest. Only a few were left standing but they weren't giving up. Lasers continued to lance at him from all directions. He threw himself at the largest cluster of troopers and cut one across the waist, sheared the gun-arm off another, took a third through the chest. He felt the pain of their deaths in the Force too, and he found he grieved for those men who'd followed orders and died without knowing why.

He was feeling generous, maybe because he was about to die too.

Cade cut down the fourth stormtrooper and pivoted toward the ones coming up behind him. He missed the one on his right flank and didn't even see the laser-bolt before it speared into his side, right below the ribcage. Pain staggered him and the reek of burnt cloth and flesh filled his nostrils. He hefted his saber, still, and without intention bounced another blast back at its originator, cutting the trooper down.

Pain ate at every step but he kept charging. Cade reached the two troopers ahead and brought them down with one slash. Another shot came at him from behind, lancing him through the kidney and burning muscle and flesh. He could barely stand; only the Force kept him upright enough to turn and see his attacker. The one stormtroopers stood like a white ghost among the bodies of his slain comrades. In seeming slow-motion the soldier hefted his rifle for another shot.

Cade flung his lightsaber. Guiding it with the Force, the weapon pinwheeled through the air and cut the trooper straight through. He collapsed in pieces and the lightsaber sailed onward, disappearing into the white sky. Cade lost touch and lost control. He could barely even stand.

Bracing himself his hands on knees, he swayed above his mounted dead. Cold wind rushed him and tipped him toward falling. He heard the sound of footsteps behind him and tried to twist again. He caught the armored form of one last trooper and thought, without shock of regret, *Guess I missed one.*

There was a flash of light and his whole body collapsed. Cade landed on his side, then rolled onto his back. Pain came from everywhere and he wondered if this was what his father had felt like during his final moments.

Even as pain and numbness washed over his body in alternating waves, his vision was still clear. He still stared straight at

the pale and cloudless sky. The last stormtrooper appeared above him, partly eclipsing the pillar of light. The soldier hefted his weapon in both hands and tilted it toward Cade.

This was death, then. Pain shuddering through his body, teeth chattering, Cade said, "Gimme a headshot, huh? Make it quick."

He'd know this was coming as soon as he'd left *Mynock's* wreckage. He hadn't even kidded himself. That was the Skywalker fate, wasn't it, to die in some self-sacrificing blaze of glory? His dad had done it. So had Nat. His grandmother had died fighting Sith and his great-grandparents had too. And every Skywalker knew how Anakin had died. The only missing piece was Luke but he was sure that guy had died by violence too. It was all part of the pattern.

So this was his fate. There was so much he wanted to be different but there was no point wanting now. Cade closed his eyes and tried to be at peace with the Force.

His reply came as an electric tang, but not that of a blaster rifle. He opened his eyes again and saw the stormtrooper jerking above him like a puppet gone haywire, blue sparks leaping from armor plate to plate. Then the trooper's body fell across Cade's, adding more pain. Red filled his vision and he thought he was going to die right there, broken body crushed by the weight of another, but something grabbed the prone trooper by the leg and dragged the body off Cade's.

And then, finally, R2-D2 rolled into view. As the little droid retracted his grabbing arm and shock baton, Cade couldn't help but smile.

He creaked, "I thought I told you... stay with the ship..."

R2 blurted an insistent negative.

"Figures... Shoulda switched you for a droid that... Followed orders..."

The astromech hooted and shook his domed head.

Cade found strength to touch R2's leg. "Thanks for coming, but... you're a little too late... I can't... Can't move, Artoo... unless you brought a full medkit..."

The droid made a mournful noise, but then released a higher, hopeful whistle.

"Wait, what... Memory... You found a karking memory? Artoo... buddy... this ain't the time..."

But R2-D2 whistled insistently, and a holo appeared above Cade's head. The droid adjusted the projection angle for Cade's low vantage point, and against the sky resolved the image of an old man with white hair and beard slumped in a bed. Figures crowded around him but the holo was centered on the man, and though his vision darkened at the edges Cade could make out that face clearly. It was warped by time but he knew those eyes, and he knew the voice too.

"It's all right," Luke Skywalker said. "Don't be sad. I can... feel the Force calling to me. It's like... words from an old friend."

A little light-haired girl beside the bed said, "We don't *want* you to go. There's so much for you to *do*." Cade's heart clenched at the realization it was his grandmother Jade.

"The Jedi are strong now... You don't need me." Luke smiled tiredly. "But you're right... I *do* have a lot to do, but it's all ahead of me... I can feel that too."

"What do you feel, Dad?" asked the man holding Jade's hand. "What's ahead of you?"

"So much... mystery. So many answers..." Luke's tired eyes went wide, like he was seeing something wondrous. "This isn't the end... Just a change... And over there... there's still work to do."

"Grandpa, what do you see?" creaked Jade.

"Oh, it's beautiful..."

Luke's eyes widened and he lifted a hand. He seemed to be reaching toward the camera and the recording caught R2-D2's confused warble. And then his arm dropped to the bed. His eyes closed and his head rolled to one side. The recording played in total silence as Luke's body faded to nothing, leaving only soft sheets and crumpled clothes behind.

The holo disappeared. Freezing wind howled overhead, but Cade could barely feel it. Parts of his body were already going cold. *At least one of us ended it right*, he thought. That knowledge gave him satisfaction like he'd never expected.

As he waited to die Cade stared at the sky where the holo had been; at R2-D2 and the pillar of light. And he knew that damned droid had played that scene for more than just comfort. It was instruction. Not for the first time, Cade wondered if the Force didn't move through that little barrel of bolts too.

He hadn't come so far just to fade away on the mountain. There was one more thing to do, and no reason not to do it.

Finding the Force and with it just a bit of strength, Cade dug elbows into stone and propped himself partway up. His chest and stomach ached with every motion, and his lungs burned and he said, "Artoo... Just help me... A little further."

The droid understood. Maybe he understood better than anyone, better than Blue or Jariah, better than Cade himself. Maybe that was why he was here now, at the end.

R2-D2 extended two grasping claws and helped pull Cade further upright. He wrapped arms around the blue dome and pulled himself up, until he was on his knees. R2 rolled ahead toward the eruption and Cade let himself be dragged. Stones tore his trousers and ripped skin on his kneecaps, but he couldn't feel them anyway.

Soon the eruption was meters away. It was just like the one he'd entered before, a brilliant plume that flickered but not with the wind. It gave off no sound whatsoever. It was surreal and frightening, an intrusion on this plane of existence from another, but it was the final door he had to pass through.

Pushing himself fully erect, Cade said, "That's enough, Artoo. I can take the rest on my own."

He hoped it was true. The power of the eruption gave him a little more strength, and though every bit of him hurt, Cade released R2-D2. His legs buckled but he remained standing under his own power.

He twisted as much as he could, looked back into the droid's reflective eye, and gave R2 a weary smile. "It's been a hell of a ride, buddy. Wouldn't have missed it for anything."

And then, one painful step after another, Cade Skywalker staggered into the light.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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The light seemed to be everything, bright enough to overwhelm all shape and thought, but there was more to it than that. Cade knew this; it was not his first time touching the Cosmic Force.

This second time he understood it better. He knew the power and intentions of the Whills and his own capabilities. He knew the destiny that had been pressed on him as a Skywalker and the necessity of embracing it. And Cade knew that this time, there was no going back.

The last time he'd been here the staggering nature of the immortal plane has coalesced into images, metaphors his human mind could comprehend. He'd imagined himself inside the great convocation hall of the Jedi academy on Ossus, standing on the podium from which his father had orated so many times and looking out on sprawling benches filled now with the formless shadows that were all he could make of the Whills.

It was different now. When the light receded and the dream-world emerged he was no longer in the great empty chamber. Instead he was on a forest path. He was crowded on either side by tall trees, dense brush, and more. He heard the snap of hungry jaws and lash of cracking whips-vines. He looked around this place that was no place and saw writhing, thorn-studded tentacles bursting out of tree-trunks. He saw fierce creatures lurking in the brush, their eyes glowing angry red, their bodies deformed by ugly yorik coral growths.

This was Wayland as it had been after the failure of the Ossus project. Cade could still remember the escape through



this nightmare landscape that had nearly killed him and his father, Shado and Nei Rin. That had been the moment he knew for sure that nothing would ever be the same.

He felt the trill of remembered fear as he looked around the imagined forest. From the lashing vines and deranged, half-Vong-formed beasts he felt the Whills pressing around him. They were no longer formless shadows; instead his mind made of them something far more fierce. The Whills were ancient and formidable, and their collective consciousness had controlled the Cosmic Force and guided the Living since the galaxy began, but they were not the whole of the Force. There existed something even greater than them, and when they'd created a Skywalker to counter the depredations of the Sith they'd birthed Anakin with unplanned powers. When Cade had tried to touch that power before, the Whills had violently restrained him.

He was invading their territory again and this Wayland nightmare-landscape was a manifestation of their hostile intent. Yet though Cade stood in the heart of their forest, he was not attacked by them. He looked around and realized he was standing on a straight slash of burned earth. It was as though a missile or crashing starship had ripped through the forest, leaving a straight line of devastation in its wake. That devastation was a path, the only one Cade could take that would not end with him being devoured by the forest of Whills.

There was only one way to go, and that was forward. Hostile plants and animals snapped at him but never reached onto the burnt path; he was safe here, but did not know where it might lead. He expanded his awareness to look through the Whills for the Unifying Force. He remembered the strength and purity of its power from the last time he'd touched it, but he could feel none of it now. The power of the Whills was oppressive; there seemed no escaped from them.

And suddenly he was not alone. Far ahead on the straight-cut path was another figure, small and shrouded but standing free of the lethal forest. Cade hurried toward it and felt its presence as he drew nearer. The mind felt newer, younger. He could comprehend it in ways he couldn't grasp the ascended minds of sentient planets and Celestials. He'd even spoken with it before, on another plane.

Soon he was close enough to make out the shrouded form clearly. Its head lifted, revealing the face of a young, grey-skinned Twi'lek. Her lips were curved in a gentle smile.

*You know me, Cade Skywalker,* said the shade of Tasha Ryo. *Let me guide you.*

Beyond Tasha he felt an even greater power, one beyond even the Whills. It felt so distant, beyond even the end of this path. *Can you take me there?* Cade asked her. *Can we reach the Unifying Force?*

*I will do what I can,* Tasha said.

*What is this place?* With a foot that was not a foot, he pounded the black-scorched path.

*This is the wound the Sith tore in the Cosmic Force.* Her smile wilted. *It is only place where the Whills cannot touch you. If you step off the path-*

*I know. It already happened to me before.*

*But you're willing to risk walking to the edge?*

*Lady,* said Cade, *it's the only direction I can go now.*

Once again, destiny had left him no other option.

Tasha extended a hand that was not a hand, and Cade took hers in his, and he let her guide him further along the path. The black scorch-mark began to twist and turn; it grew narrower and the monstrous forest snapped and lashed at him. The Whills knew his intention and were moving to stop him. Cade could feel them pulling at him from all sides, trying to sink thorn and fang into him and anchor him in the Cosmic Force where he could never leave. He followed Tasha without hesitation or fear, but the Whills were many and strong he was not one of them, just a mortal they'd gifted with unlikely power.

But Cade had never bowed to anyone else's will in life, and he'd be damned if he was going to do it now.

After a final turn, the path ahead of him finally dissolved to nothing. Knife-like blades of senalak-grass swallowed the earth. A bright light peeked through tangles of writhing, thorn-studded vines but Cade could not see the source. He could barely feel it.

Sadly, Tasha released his hand and turned to him. *This is as far as I can lead you, Cade.*

*Don't tell me I have to do the rest on my own.*

*You may have some help. But it will not be mine.*

Her formed faded before his eyes, leaving Cade alone at path's end. Vongformed vines lashed out from the forest on either side; he recoiled as he felt them strike arms that were not arms, drawing blood that was not blood.

The Whills surrounded him now; there seemed no escape. He could feel their minds more clearly than ever, and he understood not only their intentions but their motivations. He felt the ancient schism that had torn apart this timeless plane and infected the Force still. On his left he felt the dark side: angry and desperate and greedy. On the right he felt the light: certain and righteous and smothering in its concern.

The Whills of darkness said: *You cannot break the barrier that walls off the Unifying Force. If we cannot have that power, no one can. You will stay under our dominance forever. You will only know the Force that we let you touch. Your power will never supersede ours. We will crush you if you try to break free.*

And the Whills of light said: *We are doing what we can to save you. The Force is dangerous; in its full strength the darkness in mortal hearts will flourish and wreak destruction across the universe. You have seen the danger already in the Rakata, the Yuuzhan Vong, the Sith. Please, stop struggling and accept the peace we've given you. Fight more and you'll only cause your own ruin.*

Just as those two opposing sides had united to create the Chosen One, so they united now to keep the last Skywalker from breaking the silence they'd cast. And though Cade carried the Chosen One inside him he was mortal still, and their power was simply greater than his.

A crushing sense of failure spread through him. After defeating so many evils and accomplishing so much, he'd finally reached a barrier he couldn't break.

And that was when another consciousness emerged from the Cosmic Force, small but strong and so familiar.

*Don't give up, his father said. We are here for you.*

And suddenly the forest in which Cade was caught disappeared. His imagined physical form seemed to dissolve as well and was suddenly inside an even worse memory, a roving eye forced to watch as Kol Skywalker stood on the catwalk

connecting the landing platform to the Jedi Temple on Ossus. The jungle burned around them, smoke filled the air, and the sky was red as blood. Stormtroopers and Sith charged at him one after another. He built a rampart of the dead but they continued to throw themselves at him. Stray laser bolts and skimming lightsabers tore at Kol's flesh and he commanded the Force to keep him upright. And still the Sith kept coming.

*The Force is your guide even now*, his father said. The voice was like a whisper in the ear Cade didn't have. As he watched his father cross blades with Darth Nihl, Kol told him, *I knew there was no hope for me, but I stood my ground so you and the padawans could escape. I knew you were the future of the Jedi- more, the future of the Force. And I was right.*

*I can't do this, Dad*, Cade protested, *It's just too much.*

*I told you we are here for you. Skywalkers give to Skywalkers. All Skywalkers. We sacrifice for one another, but even when we're gone we stay with one another.*

And a new, familiar mind said, *Don't be afraid, boy. We've all got our part to play.*

And suddenly Cade saw another battle. He knew this one too. Bodies littered the floor of the Jedi temple on Taivas. Smoke and fire filled the air and the whole building shuddered from the pounding of Imperial turbolaser bolts. Cade saw himself, lightsaber in hand, battling faceless Sith troopers, the worst of Darth Krayt's evil alchemy. And he saw his uncle Nat, barely recognizable for his brown Jedi tunic and Marin's gold-bladed lightsaber, unlike the simple mechanic he'd pretended to be.

Nat was an old man but he moved like one far younger. He was so *graceful*, and Cade had never noticed in the heat of battle. This was to be Nat's final one, and Cade dreaded the thought of reliving that again, too.

*You didn't have to do this*, Cade told his uncle. *You could have stayed on Kiffex with Droo and the kits. You could have been safe.*

*I could never have never done anything but this*, Nat replied. *You should know better than anybody how pointless it is to try running from destiny, boy. This was mine, making my stand where I belonged. Saving your ugly hide.*

*I'm sorry.*

*And I say don't be. Skywalkers give to Skywalkers, and every*

*sacrifice matters. If I hadn't saved you on Tavius you'd never be able to do what you're doing now.*

*I'm trying to do it, but I don't think I can.*

*We're lending you our strength,* Kol soothed.

*It's still not enough!*

*It will be,* a third voice said, and Cade knew it as his grandmother's.

The battle on Taivas vanished, replaced by yet another. This one was smaller, with just three figures battling along the span of a rough-hewn bridge, suspended over an endless gap. A scarred woman with emerald skin and scarlet lightsaber blazed dark side energy. Battling her were a red-haired man and blond-haired teenage girl. Cade had never seen this fight- it had happened decades before he was born- but he knew it instantly.

*I lived a long life,* Jade told him calmly as her younger self struggled against the Sith's lightning blaze. *Longer than my father, my husband, my sons. Or you. In my time I knew so many people, but I only learned the truth about so many of them in their final moments. In dying they defined their lives.*

*This isn't final and it's not a moment,* Cade told her. *There is no time here.*

*Here is forever, and we're building a bridge across it.*

*But I'm just not strong enough.*

*Stand firm and we'll be with you. See this moment. This defined my father.*

Cade watched them battle on the bridge: father, daughter, Sith. The Sith became a storm of lightning, a brilliant ball of darkness. She fell on Ben, forcing him to his knees with her powerful saber-swings, while Jade ran at her from behind and leaped. The Sith blasted her with a lightning-volley; Jade flew through it, protected by her father even as the Sith brought her blade down on him. Ben's body vanished not the Force; Jade landed on the Sith saber-first, spearing her into the chest, and flew through as her body vanished in one last flare of hate. And even then, already part of the Force, Ben protected her.

*Not all people are defined by their deaths,* said Jade. *This defined me as well.*

He watched Jade fall to her knees before the burnt scraps of her father's robe, pick up his lightsaber in both hands, and cradle it to her chest.

*Skywalkers give to Skywalkers, she repeated. I understood then. And it made now inevitable.*

*You stand now where no Skywalker ever has, said a new voice, one Cade had never heard before, but he knew it to be Ben's. In dying we passed into the Cosmic Force, not like the Whills but like a drop dissolving into an ocean. Your presence here has roused us all again. The ocean has become a drop.*

Cade felt their power flowing into him, giving resilience against the Whills. He felt Kol's serious resolve, leavened by Nat's wry affection. He felt Jade's age-earned wisdom and Ben's happy release from tragedy.

*We can stand with you, Cade, Ben said, but we can't give you everything.*

*As always, one more voice said, your fate is up to you.*

Cade knew that well. *Where are you, Luke? You wanna show me something too? I know it's not going to be your hour of dying. Artoo just showed me that, and it was a lot nicer than any of theirs.*

*I know, said Luke, but I like to think I earned it. And somehow, Cade could hear his ancestor's wry smile.*

And Cade saw another fight, this one in a dark metal chamber, looking out on a raised dais while a distant battle flashing through the round viewport. A cloaked figure sat on the throne there, watching in sadistic glee as two men in black battled. One was masked and caped, more machine than human. The other was even younger than Cade, his bare face already heavy with battle and loss.

Green saber clashed against red furiously, again and again, and Cade watched as Luke batted Darth Vader onto a short bridge suspended over an infinite shaft. Again and again he attacked until he cleaved Vader's hand off, leaving a sparking mechanical wreck behind.

*This defined my father, and it defined me, Luke said.*

Cade watched as Luke stood over his father's prone body in horror of what he'd done. He watched Darth Sidious urge him toward murder and he watched Luke throw his lightsaber away.

*Sometimes surrender is the bravest choice, Cade's ancestor told him. Sometimes you must choose to accept the gifts of others.*

And Cade saw Luke's body wracked by Sidious' lightning, and he saw Vader rise, pick up the flaring Sith, and hurl him into the black pit below, saving his son and saving himself.

*Skywalkers give to Skywalkers, Luke said. Always.*

*Then what do you want me to do now? Just... give in?*

*To touch the Unifying Force requires surrender of self, said Kol. It demands you embrace the totality of existence rather than struggle against it.*

*But if I don't fight, how can I win?*

*Let us fight for you, boy, Nat told him.*

And Ben said, *Let us hold up your bridge.*

Cade had spent a lifetime fighting, first against his destiny and then for it. He never felt like himself unless he was acting in a state of strife.

*There is victory in surrender, said Jade. Just allow us to hold you up.*

And suddenly Cade was back where he'd been: at the place where scorched path was overrun by forest, the tempting brightness of the Unifying Force frustratingly occluded by dense, hostile jungle. Yet still Cade tried to reach that pure power. One part of him remained firm in the Cosmic Force, anchored inside the wound torn by Plagueis and Sidious two centuries ago, the wound he'd been made to heal. Yet instead of plugging it he was stretching it wider, praying that through ferocity and willpower and pure damned stubbornness he could rip it so wide the Unifying Force could flow directly into the Living, pure and strong.

Cade had to battle every instinct. He repressed the desire for struggle against the Whills and the fear of being trapped forever without time and body by their power. And he found the less he struggled, the less they resisted. The Whills still surrounded him and pressed him on all sides, but he remained as he was, stretched long with part of him lodged in the wound the Sith had made in the Cosmic Force, the rest of him reaching for the Unifying. The presence of the other five Skywalkers crowded him too, holding him in place, fending off the Whills of darkness and Whills of light. They extended the path a little further, brought him a little closer to the source of everything.

He could see it, even feel it, but Cade could move no closer

toward it. He was like a half-finished bridge cantilevered over a river, helpless to reach the other side.

*This can't be it*, he told his ancestors. *I still can't get to the end.*

*We already told you that you don't have to do everything by yourself*, Luke admonished gently. *Patience, Cade. There are others yet to come.*



## Chapter Thirty-Five

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Wind-blown ash flecked her vision, the air smelled of burning things, and the crackle of laserfire was incessant, but the none of that distracted Marin Solo from what she felt in the Force. All around her was a cacophony of desperate beings; beyond them she felt the dying of the organic flyer that they'd barely crash-landed into the low forested slope, and beyond even that was the emanation of raw power she felt blazing at the high-off mountaintop.

The power called to her, drawing her on, but Marin stayed put behind the cover of one thick-trunked tree. They were surrounded on all sides and had no place to run.

The flyer's Yuuzhan Vong pilots had put them down as nimbly as possible and commanded the living craft's dovin basals to angle skyward to continue swallowing bolts poured onto the landed craft by overhead TIEs. That had given its passengers- Marin, Marasiah, Khat Lah and his Yuuzhan Vong- time to run into the surrounding forests. The flyer had done its job valiantly but once everyone escaped, its dovin basals were finally overloaded and the TIEs chewed the ship to pieces with repeated strafing runs.

That hadn't been the end of it. Though they'd tried to scatter into the forest their escape had been noticed. Federation assault shuttles had dropped to the canopy overhead and dozens of stormtroopers had repelled down to the forest floor. Despite their flyer's sacrifice and every effort at escape, they were trapped.

And that immense blaze of Force-power still called to Marin, promising answer to all her questions.

Khat Lah's warriors itched to take the battle to the enemy but they also had to protect a dozen of Nei Rin's shapers. The scientists had been crowded into a small crevasse for their own safety; good for defense but hard to break out of. The warriors crouched behind tree trunks and stone shelves along the crevasse rim, hurling thud bugs at the stormtroopers who were coming at them from all sides. The warriors had good throwing arms and Force-powers to aid them, but the troopers had the dominant position and longer range. As she crouched behind a tree, returning fire with her own blaster, Marin spotted one Yuuzhan Vong fall to a sharpshooter's headshot, then another.

Marasiah, sharing the same thick trunk, had grabbed another blaster and was shooting into the forest, not even aiming, just spraying desperate laser blasts. Marin could feel the emotions boiling off the younger woman, none of them good. The black hate inside of her was welling to the surface, and Marin had heard how it had been unleashed on Milagro. Marasiah had been on the brink of darkness and despair since losing her husband and throne; her only defense against them had been to seek inner emptiness, effectively death within life.

"You don't have to give in," Marin shouted to her over the continued crackle of plasma bolts.

Marasiah ducked fully behind the tree and stared at her in disbelief. "What else can we do? We will *not* survive this!"

"There's still ships up there, the mercenary fleet. And Jao said Stazi is coming too--"

"It doesn't matter!" Marasiah snarled. "Hogrum was the planet surrounded! And Sekot won't- or can't- defend itself!"

Instead of arguing more Marasiah peeked around the trunk again and fired more bolts. Marin was about to join but she caught a flicker of white through the trees to her left. Rather than shout warning she reached out with the Force and touched warning on the closest group of Yuuzhan Vong. Their leader, the surprisingly-eloquent Xahn Carr, spun ninety degrees to throw thudbugs right into the approaching stormtroopers. One soldier went down but the others ducked behind cover and began firing on Xahn Carr's group from the side. Some bolts sizzled high and Marin had to grabbed Marasiah by the shoulders and pull her down.

"Let me go," Marasiah twisted away, rolling through the dirt.

“Stay back! I will take them! I’ll take them all!”

“No! There’s another way!”

“Not for me.” She strained to sit upright; her young face was so very sad. “Let me fight the only way I can.”

Marin felt her tip toward darkness and despair; Marasiah was ready to give herself willingly, to embrace it and draw out its destructive power. She’d given up on everything, even the pretense of light.

And then a new shock rippled through the Force. Marasiah felt it too and spun around, looking. More laserfire flashed through the forest, but not near their crevasse. Beneath that sharp tang Marin heard the loud low drone of repulsorlifts, and when she looked up she saw a transport blocking out part of the sky.

The Yuuzhan Vong figured out what was happening before Marin. Xahn Carr called out to his warriors and they rose to their feet and charged. The two women moved cautiously out from behind their cover and saw warriors bearing amphistaffs racing through the woods, taking stormtroopers from behind with thrusts and slashes. At the same time, the troopers tried to defend themselves against the newcomers, but laser blasts cut sharply through the forest, downing one after another.

Within minutes, the stormtroopers had fallen. The new silence was tense, and Marin finally understood why. She charged through the forest until she spotted Khat Lah’s gray-haired head. The warrior was standing his ground four meters from a set of black-armored soldiers who’d trained their rifles on him.

“Hold fire! Hold fire!” Marin called. “We’re friendly!”

The soldiers hesitated; despite coming to the rescue they seemed confused. Likely they hadn’t expecting to help a bunch of Yuuzhan Vong.

Then Sora Auchs shouldered to the front of the group. The young woman looked at Khat Lah and his warriors, then at Marin. “You’re welcome,” she said, then signaled her troopers to lower their weapons.

“Thank you,” Marin told her. “I didn’t realize we’d called for help.”

“You didn’t, but we marked your ship go down from orbit. And if *you* get killed, we’re not getting the payment you promised.”

Marin smiled. "How mercenary."

"Thank you."

Sora scanned the forest again and her eyes lit on Marasiah. There was no surprise in them; Marin figured she'd been listening in when relaying their transmission with Chalk. That meant she also knew Ania was involved in all this.

*Ania.* Marin remembered *Free Agent* shooting down *Mynock* before turning its guns on them. The only explanation she could think of was that the ship had been hijacked, and that meant her daughter needed rescue.

"We've got about twenty people," Marin said. "We're going to need a ride out of here."

"I know. I saw what happened to yours."

"And we're going to need more help. When you were inbound, did you see my daughter's ship? You know what it looks like."

"I saw it," Sora confirmed. "Parked near the mountaintop. It was in a lot better condition than yours, or that *Helox*-class that went down."

"Did you see what happened to the Jedi or Mon Cal shuttles?" Marasiah asked.

Sora stared at the ex-empress for a long moment before replying, "No. But we can look into it."

"First we need to get to Ania's ship," Marin insisted. "She's aboard, and we need to rescue her."

"You seem to be doing a lot of that," Sora said dryly but her eyes were narrowed on Marin, thoughtful. Again her thoughts were shielded in the Force, and Marin wondered what she planned to do if she got hands on Ania.

Marin stepped closer until she was within arms' reach of Sora. She lowered her voice and said, "My daughter had nothing to do with your father's death. She wasn't in the place to make that recording. You know that, right?"

"I remember what happened on Bakura," Sora said stiffly.

"Then there's no reason to harm Ania, even if you think I had something to do with it, which I *didn't*. Are we clear? What's gone on between Auchs and Skiratas is over. It's done."

"My father made mistakes. He was the first one to admit them... even if it was only to me."

"You don't have to repeat them."

"I know. I'm trying not to." She fixed Marin a hard glare. "But you're making it *such* a challenge."

Behind them, Marasiah interrupted, "We may be running out of time even now. Are we going or aren't we?"

"We're going," Sora sighed and told her soldiers, "Load up the Vong. Get 'em aboard and prep guns to clean off some TIEs." Looking at Marin she said, "We've got a mountain to climb."

Gunner's laserfire scattered green ripples across the gunship's shields, and as she cut across its bow she twisted her TIE Predator into a series of evasive maneuvers to escape the return fire its tracking turrets spewed. Though no shots landed the inertial strain jarred her violently about, and the only thing keeping her from cracking her helmet against the cockpit interior was the crash webbing across her chest, which bit painfully through the shoulders of her flight suit.

Once she was clear of the gunship, Gunner released a short burst of swears. The hard evasive had been bad enough, but she wasn't swearing because of that. This whole operation was a mess. The holo-transmission they'd received from Astraal Vao had gotten no follow-up and no explanation. She and her father understood what the holo had *seemed* to show and the implications were staggering, but they had no proof the thing was even real. But if it was an elaborate forgery why reveal it now, of all times? And how could anyone- especially Astraal Vao, who was no master technician- have cooked up such a good fake in so short a time?

Gunner had thrown all those questions at her father after they'd received the message. Rulf Yage had had no answer to any of them. Worse, he'd clammed up like he had in the bad old days when she and her father barely spoke to each other. He'd ordered her to go back to her station and prepare Skull Squadron for combat and warned her not to say anything about this to her pilots, not that she'd been planning to anyway.

When the order had come down to withdraw from Bavinyar and re-deploy at this place, wherever it was, she'd reached out to him again, but Admiral Yage had given no reply.

As frustrated as she was with his indecision, Gunner knew he was facing an impossible choice. The suspicious holo was all

he had as proof for Chalk's treason, and that was the word for betraying his empress, beyond a doubt. If Marasiah was alive and could be recovered the path would be clear; as it was they were all stuck in limbo, waiting for cause to act.

Gunner had no idea what planet they were battling over now. Her nav computer said there wasn't even supposed to be one here and it didn't look like it had any large settlements. The mercenary fleet that had engaged them in orbit was not nearly strong enough to take on four star destroyers, and after deploying ground forces to the surface, Chalk had ordered the entire fleet to savage Black Spear Company.

The mercs knew the odds were stacked against them, so they'd done what fleets of little ships did best: constant hit-and-run attacks. They were leading Chalk's ships on a damned chase around the planet's orbit, drawing all three of her father's star destroyers away from the deployment zone. Their gunships and snubfighters nipped at the Federation picket ships and always moved out before coming in range of the destroyers' turbolaser batteries.

They were stalling for time, but Gunner had absolutely no idea what they were waiting for.

Once, when her TIE had dipped into lower orbit, Gunner had attempted to hail her half-brother's ship. Cade Skywalker might help clear up this convoluted messed-up battle. He might even have the empress with him.

That he was probably the key to all this was incredibly annoying, and as she'd tried to hail *Mynock* Gunner had braced himself for the dismissive snark in his voice. But no reply came, which could have meant he was ignoring her, or busy, or shot down and killed by that first wave of TIEs and landers Chalk had sent to the surface.

Stuck up here chasing gunships, Gunner didn't and couldn't know. If she dared be honest with herself she'd admit she was worried about the *sleemo*. After losing her mother, it didn't seem right to lose her brother too. That would mean a whole half of her family- of herself- was gone.

"Skull Lead, this is Nine, coming in on your six."

Rimmon's voice jarred her mind back where it should be. *Keep your head in the battle*, she scolded herself as she checked the sensor board. Four TIE Predators were settling

behind her. She'd lost one of her pilots and so had Jae Akura's flight, but the Skulls were still ten fighters strong. She also saw that the merc gunship lingering behind them, still in firing range, but its fighter screen had been pulled away to chase a squadron of TIE Neutralizers. It looked like the bombers had just dropped their payloads, which meant the gunship's shields would be nice and tender.

Switching her comm to squadron freq, Gunner said, "Form up, Skulls. We're going to pound those mercs until they scream for mercy, and *then* we'll pound them harder."

"I love you when you get feisty, boss," Rimmon said eagerly.

Gunner ignored him. Sometimes she enjoyed the flirty banter but now.

She wanted to get the hell out of here but she was soldier enough to follow her father's order. Whether Rulf Yage was soldier enough to follow *his* was another question, and she had no answer. Until she got one, all she could do was fight.

When Ania woke up she found her right cheek planted firmly onto cold smooth metal and saw the legs of a stormtrooper like two white tree-trunks ahead of her. Then she felt the pinch of cable at her wrists and also at her ankles, and then she remembered how Eli Horn had jumped her in the cockpit, knocking out Sauk first, then Azlyn, then finally her. And she remembered, with a flare of rage, what he'd done to AG-37.

She lay there for a while, collecting thoughts and observing. Two stormtroopers passed in and out of *Free Agent's* aft hold on lazy patrol. She couldn't tell if there were more elsewhere in the ship. They'd deposited Azlyn and Sauk in this room too, as well as the pieces that had been AG-37. When the stormtroopers had their backs turned she twisted her head to get a better look at his pile of parts. It hurt her heart to see them but she scoured them with a precise eye for something she could use.

Sauk still wasn't moving- he'd hit his head hard and might have a concussion- but Azlyn was awake too. Like Ania she tried not to stir when the stormtroopers were looking but their eyes met from across the three-meter distance of deck. Azlyn's kept darting meaningfully toward AG-37, which meant she'd come up with the same idea.

Slowly, Ania pieced together a plan.

There was no way to communicate it directly to Azlyn, but she was prepared to take the lead and let the other woman figure it out. She took the first small risk by rolling onto her back and moaning in view of a stormtrooper, as though she'd just come painfully out of shock. The stormie looked down on her and told her to be still but didn't pump another stun bolt into her. So far, so good.

She waited until he switched with the other guard. Azlyn did the same thing, drawing the stormie toward her with his back to Ania. While that stormie threatened, more aggressively, to put a kill shot in Azlyn's chest if she didn't shut up, Ania used legs and elbows to push herself across the slick deck and reach AG's remains. She twisted to grab a piece she'd had her eye on: the upper portion of his arm, where the shoulder-joint had been burned through by Eli's saber and left a sharp scorched edge behind.

The trooper above Azlyn was still here. He kicked her in the stomach and told her against to shut up or he really would blast her. This time Azlyn stayed still, and by the time the trooper looked back at Ania, she'd resumed the same position as before with the piece of AG-37's shoulder-blade now hidden between arms and stomach.

She waited until the other trooper took his round in the hold before she got to work, slowly but steadily sawing through the cable around her ankles. It snapped easily and she gave Azlyn a tiny nod to signify her feet were free. When the first trooper came back Azlyn curled in a fetal position and moaned softly.

The trooper stood above her and shook his head. "Come on, I didn't hit you that hard," he said.

Ania sprung to her feet and leaped on him from behind. The binds around her wrists were still attached but she pulled arms wide enough to slip the cable across the front of the trooper's throat like a garrote. Choked too hard to cry out, he dropped his blaster and tried to free his neck. His partner didn't seem to notice the clatter and when the trooper went limp, Ania slowly lowered his body the deck. She kicked the sharp-edge shoulder-piece to Azlyn, who caught it and began cutting herself free. Ania grabbed the dropped the rifle awkwardly with her still-bound hands and pointed it at the door.



When the second trooper walked in, she dropped him with a stun blast before he knew what was happening. There was no hiding the noise but by that time Azlyn had cut her wrists and ankles both free. Ania tossed her the rifle and took the shoulder-blade back to free her hands. She worked quickly; footsteps were pounding toward them, drawn by the blast. Azlyn quickly skirted up to the stunned trooper and kicked his rifle back toward Ania. She scooped it up and both women, fully freed and armed, scattered to opposite ends of the room to get a full range of fire.

The approaching troopers- two or three by the sound of them- saw the bodies of their comrades and paused. Ania, deciding to press advantage while they had it, stalked up to the threshold, stuck her head through the opening, and fired a spray of kill shots.

She got one trooper in the chest and ducked back. Her ponytail lagged a split-second behind her head and the smell of burning hair assaulted her. She fell back and took cover, so when the other two troopers rounded into the chamber they blasted the wall behind her. They missed Azlyn entirely, and she took them down with two precise shots to the back.

Silence filled the hold. It sounded like it was over, but Ania whispered as she said, "Okay we've got to scour the ship. Make sure it's clear, get a medpack for Sauk."

"And figure out where in the hell we are," said Azlyn.

"That too. Cockpit first. Let's go."

They made their way up the long corridor to the ship's bow, rifles ready but unnecessary. *Free Agent* was parked at some level space on the snow-coated mountainside. Scattered clouds spread beneath them and from this angle Ania couldn't see what was happening on the mountaintop. There was no sign of Eli, thankfully.

With that done the two women headed back to sick bay. They'd just begun looking through supplies when they heard the clatter of footsteps. Alert again, they readied their rifles and hesitantly peeked out into the corridor. Daylight spilling through the entry hatch turned the first figures into silhouettes; Ania marked the armor on their bodies but their heads were exposed, not like stormies at all. Another figure walked in, unarmored, tall and thin, female and familiar.

Lowering her weapon and stepping full into the corridor, Ania called, "Mom?"

Marin spun, saw her, and froze. "Ania? Are you all right?"

"Me? I'm just fine." She let the blaster dangle at her side and grinned. "What took you so long?"

The battle above Zonama Sekot had settled into a pointless stalemate. The ships from Black Spear Company were refusing to engage Yage's destroyers directly and instead leading him on a petty chase around the planet. They were too weak to win the fight but too dangerous to be ignored, and so Chalk had tasked Yage with keeping up the pursuit. They'd managed to destroy one mercenary gunship and they'd pick off the rest one-by-one if they had to.

Despite that, Hogrum was worried. Something had gone wrong on the surface. He knew it. Colonel Rayez and his 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry had successfully deployed on the mountain, cordoning off the eruption of energy left behind by the Tho Yor. Hogrum had gotten confirmation of that, and direct word from Eli Horn that he'd shot Cade Skywalker's *Mynock* out of the sky.

It had seemed like clean-up was the only thing left, but Colonel Rayez had failed to report his next scheduled check-in. Attempts to raise him by comm had been useless, as had attempts to contact Eli. Orbital visual scans appeared to show stormtroopers still ringed around one bright point of light, but those seemed unreliable. According to his technicians, the discharge of energy wasn't appearing on their sensors at all. Hogrum had ordered the TIEs and remaining units of the 102<sup>nd</sup> to return to the mountaintop and report the situation, but so far none had reached it.

But even in his panic, Hogrum was a man who knew how to wait. He'd tasked Yage with hounding those mercenaries and commanded the *Jagged Fel* to take up geosynchronous orbit over the mountain. Yage and his quarry were on the opposite side of the planet when he finally got his reply from the leader of the TIE Predator wing.

"Regent, we've just flown a pass over the mountain," the pilot's voice crackled over the speaker. "The, ah, beacon is still lit but the troopers are down. Repeat, they are *down*."

"All of them?" Rayez had promised a full battalion would

defend it, complete with heavy weapon batteries.

“Yes, Regent.”

“How?”

“I... I’m not certain. There appears to be more forces deploying around the beacon.”

“Mercenaries?”

“Yes, sir. One of their troop transports has just set down.”

“And you *let* them?”

“We attempted to get close, sir, but their anti-starfighter turrets already shot down one of my pilots.”

Incompetents, all of them. Hogrum snarled, “Is there any sign of Agent Horn?”

“No, sir. Should we try and re-establish a cordon?”

Hogrum ran through his potential options quickly. To retake control of the summit would be costly, especially if those mercenaries had anti-air weapons to ward off intruders. If they’d taken out that stormtrooper company they must have had formidable weapons, and he wondered if any Force-users might have helped them. It seemed the only explanation.

It was always the damned Force, ruining his designs one time after another. He wanted nothing more than to blast it to oblivion. Before he’d suggested levelling the entire mountain with the *Jagged Fel*’s turbolaser batteries but Eli had warned him off. This time he wouldn’t hesitate.

“Pull your ships well clear of the mountain,” Hogrum told the pilot. “Send a broad hail and tell all stormtroopers left on the slope to evacuate as well. We’re going to launch an orbital bombardment.”

The pilot didn’t argue. “We’ll get clear right away, sir.”

Hogrum killed the link and called to Captain Worgaan. “Move us into lower orbit. Prepare a firing solution on that mountain. I want to cracked open and ground to a flat field. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Worgaan nodded. “But, sir, the planet’s natural defenses—”

“If it hasn’t used them now it won’t use them at all. Drop altitude and prepare turbolaser batteries.”

“Of course, sir.”

The captain saluted and hurried off. Hogrum stood in the center of the bridge and watched them all scurry to motion. His

gaze caught Astraal Vao at her corner console and she immediately looked away. His aide had barely said anything to him since the flight from Bavinyar. He was sure more calls had come in from Coruscant but Astraal hadn't brought them to his attention and he was fine with that. One threat at a time. Once he demolished the mountain and its surreal Force-beacon he could turn his focus to mundane matters.

He remembered the last moments on Bavinyar, and how Marasiah had been swept into the belly of that Sekotan flyer. Perhaps she'd been rescued by the mercenaries. Perhaps her burgeoning dark side power, the kind Eli had described to him, had been of use. Maybe she'd slaughtered the entire storm-trooper company herself.

Time and again he thought he'd killed her and ended the threat she represented. Though he'd never feel comfortable without her body before him he allowed the hope that she was on that mountain now, helpless before the incineration he was about to rain down.

The *Jagged Fel* sank lower, and Zonama Sekot's verdant curve filled the lower half of the bridge's viewport. They were nearing the outer edge of its atmospheric envelope, the perfect range for what they had to accomplish.

As Hogrum stepped toward the gunnery crew pit, a call from the tactical station turned his head.

"Regent, sir, new ships have entered the system," the lieutenant said.

Hogrum hurried across the deck to see a row of lit-up markers past the edge of Zonama Sekot's gravity well. For a second they lingered at indeterminate yellow as the ship's computers identified friend from foe. Then they turned a bright, hostile red.

The lieutenant's face fell. "Regent, these ship profiles match known rebel vessels."

"Let me see," Hogrum rasped.

He leaned over the man's shoulder to read the list of confirmed ship classifications. Those were exactly the type of craft used by the resistance, old and second-hand but modified to still be formidable. They numbered more than twice as many as the mercenary ships and, he saw with growing dread, many of them seemed to match ones that had been spotted at

Selvaris. They'd dropped out of hyperspace on the same side of Zonama Sekot as the *Jagged Fel* and were bearing toward them, their thrusters' speed accelerated by pull from the planet's gravity. Yage's ships might not even reach them in time.

Another blow, the worst, came from the comm station. The lieutenant said, "We're receiving a hail from the lead ship. They're requesting to speak with you personally."

Hogrum strode heavily toward the station. "Put it on your console, officer." He knew what was coming but didn't want the bridge crew to see. It might break their morale; it would certainly shatter his.

He leaned close over the lieutenant's shoulder and watched the holo spring to life. It was a full-body shot, shrunk to a quarter-meter in height but still intimidating. The Duros in the image looked fit and hale, and Galactic Alliance admiral's uniform fit him perfectly. It was like time had been turned back six years to another war.

The voice was strong too as he declared, "This is Admiral Gar Stazi, rightful leader of the Galactic Federation. We have come to defend Zonama Sekot. I promise all ships that if they remove themselves from the battle they will not be harmed. Any that stand in our way or threaten the planet will be destroyed."

When they reached the peak of the mountain, it wasn't what they'd expected. A massive compliment of stormtroopers, perhaps a full company, had been stationed at this mountaintop to prevent it from being taken. They were dead or broken, all of them. White-armored bodies layer scattered across the bare rock, many in lightsaber-scorched pieces. A few repeating blasters slumped on their tripod mounts, unmanned with barrels cleaved off. Close to the center, stormtrooper bodies were piled waist-high like a barricade, though from the way the bodies were entangled it was clear they'd fallen naturally. Cold fast wind had carried away the stench of death, leaving the mountaintop frigid and sterile.

Marin saw all of that but barely noticed. She was drawn toward the pillar of light spearing soundlessly toward the sky.

She started walking toward it on her own, leaving behind the

Yuuzhan Vong, Marasiah, Ania, Azlyn, and Sauk, the last of whom moved as in a daze and bore a big white bacta patch over the injured side of his head. The barricade of dead stormtroopers seemed to wall off the source of the eruption, but it would be an easy thing to vault the waist-high barrier and step into the light. And it called to her, so strongly.

Cade Skywalker had explained how great and terrible a fountainhead of pure Force energy was. Since hearing it, Marin had dared to imagine the experience and even craved it. Being near it and feeling its emanations filled her with awe.

She was distracted by a high electronic whistle. As though emerging from the mounds of bodies, a single white-and-blue astromech rolled toward them across the rock.

Ania trotted forward and dropped to one knee beside the droid. "Artoo, what's going on? What happened here?"

The droid gave a series of warbles and chirps, first enthusiastic, then serious.

"Ah, stang," Ania sighed and looked at the light-pillar. "That idiot..."

Marin didn't need to be told. "Cade went inside."

R2-D2 hooted sober affirmative.

Marasiah came up alongside them. "Is he still in there now?"

Khat Lah joined them and peered into the light, eyes narrowed. "I can... sense some of Cade Skywalker, even now... It is as before, I think..."

Marin felt the Yuuzhan Vong reach out, probing the eruption with the Force. The light responded. Its thick pillar seemed to flicker at the edges, though the core remained luminous. Marin peered as well, reaching out with the Force to seek hints of Skywalker. She knew the man less well than Marasiah or Khat Lah, but she thought she detected hints of that reckless, irascible bravery.

R2-D2 beeped something else and Ania translated, "He says Cade was badly wounded in the fight. He was dying when he walked into the light."

"Then he had no choice..." muttered Marasiah.

"But he exists within the eruption," Khat Lah said. "I can feel him. He is part of the Cosmic Force, but he has not fully left the Living... I feel as though—"

Something else flickered in the light-pillar, not at the edges

but the core. For staccato milliseconds Marin could see a human body- Cade's body- levitated in the light, trapped and suspended between planes.

"What is he trying to do?" Marasiah asked. "What does he think he can accomplish?"

"What we brought the Tho Yor to Zonama to do," Khat Lah said gravely. "Awaken the Force."

"Wait, you mean he's trying to open the Force to... everyone?" Ania said in disbelief.

"It is everything or nothing," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "I knew that after my second meeting with Tasha Ryo."

The ancient Je'daii had seemed confused and hesitant, even frightened when Marin had encountered her in the Tho Yor. Now Marin fully understood. With the help of Sekot's raw strength, Tasha had propelled herself fully into the Cosmic Force, becoming a Whill and turning her mortal shell- the Tho Yor- into this eruption of energy. That blaze wouldn't last forever; she could feel Sekot straining, even now, to keep it lit. Even a living world didn't have infinite power, and that was probably why Zonama Sekot hadn't defended itself either. It was expending everything to keep this gate open.

Cade Skywalker had stepped into the light to do the only things left he could do. Bravely, recklessly, he was trying even now. But he needed help.

A shudder ran through Marin's body, and with great effort she looked away from the light.

Most of the Yuuzhan Vong, both warriors and shapers, were holding well clear of the eruption, but their eyes were turned upward and faces slack in a purely religious awe. As she slipped past them Sora Auch's expression was quite different: wariness and even fear threatened her professional aplomb.

Slowly she came up to Marin and said, "We've done some tracking and still haven't found that Jedi shuttle, but we've found the location where the Mon Cal ship went down."

Ania immediately turned to her. "How bad did it crash?"

"I'm not sure. It fled over fifty kilometers north of here before dropping into the forest."

Marin knew what her daughter had to do. "You should go get them."

"If there's anyone left to get," Sora said. "There's still TIEs

patrolling that area, and they may have dropped troopers.”

“All the more reason to bring an armed guard.”

Sora didn’t look pleased. She glanced warily at the silent, blazing light-pillar. “Is this.... thing what’s left of the object you had us guard?”

“It is,” said Marin, “But the Yuuzhan Vong can protect it in case stormtroopers try to retake it. Your new job is to go with Ania and help recover the four people on that crashed shuttle.”

“If they’re alive,” Sora reminded.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Ania said. “And we’d better get moving. This time *I* want to be the one to rescue somebody.”

“All right, then,” said Sora. “We’ll take my ship.”

“Ania,” said Sauk, “I wish I could come for Jao, but...”

“You’re in no shape, I get that.” She put hands on his shoulders. “I’ll go with Sora. We’ll get Jao back, I promise.”

“I should go with you,” Marasiah said. “I... may prove useful.”

Ania’s expression relaxed from surprise into a smile. “You’re definitely welcome to come. Mom, I-”

“You can handle it by yourself, I know you can.” She glanced at Sora. “But you’ll have help. Payment on delivery, of course.”

The mercenary snorted. “You’d better hold true to that.”

“I’m a woman of my word,” Marin said, very seriously.

Sora stared into her eyes, still wondering if it was true. But finally she said, “All right, let’s get moving.”

She started toward her ship first. Marasiah followed, more slowly, and Azlyn followed her. Ania lingered in front of her mother, wondering something she couldn’t bring herself to say.

Marin put hands on her shoulders. “You’ll get Jao back. I know you will. The Force is with you... even if you don’t think it is.”

“Right now I really hope so,” Ania croaked.

“I know so.” Marin leaned in and kissed her daughter once on the forehead. “Now get moving.”

Ania got moving. She jogged downslope after the other women. Marin watched her go, until the tip of her head had disappeared beneath the rim of gray stone.

And even then she didn’t look away. She waited until Sora’s



assault shuttle rose from the mountainside and took off in the air on a blaze of red thrusters. She felt her daughter in the Force, focused on the mission ahead of her, dwindle in the distance. Ania could take care of herself. Marin wished the reasons for that had been different- wished she'd been there to see her daughter grow up and protect her when she'd needed help- but despite all the ways she'd failed Ania, there was no shame in what she'd had become.

Marin had a lot of regrets in life, too many, but her daughter wasn't one of them. She was unspeakably glad for that.

Wind blew over the mountaintop and the eruption blazed in silence. It was Sauk who asked, "You're going in there, aren't you?"

"I think I have to." Marin stared into the light.

He didn't object. Neither did Khat Lah. Instead Sauk asked, "What about Ania?"

"She's not the type for messy goodbyes. Neither am I. And this ending... it's a lot better than the last one we got."

No one spoke. All Marin had to do was vault the white barricade and step into the light. She was prepared for that, mentally. In way she'd anticipated this moment since Cade had first told her of his encounter three years ago. But before going in she carefully, calmly thought on what else needed to be done.

She found only one thing. Turning on Sauk she asked, "Do you have a data-reader?"

He blinked bulbous eyes. "I... might have my portable one."

"Can I have it?"

The Mon Cal ran hands over his jumpsuit pockets until he found the palm-sized datapad. He handed it to Marin and she quickly typed in three strings of alpha-numeric text.

"This is the routing number and access information for a credit account," she told Sauk as she handed the data-reader back. "It has all the payment Sora Auch's will need."

"Are you sure you can trust her with Ania?"

"I think I can, actually." Just saying so brought a smile to Marin's lips. It felt like weight being lifted.

Sauk clutched the data-reader to his chest. He stared at Marin and tried to find something to say.

"It's all right," she told him. "This is good. Really."

"Do you want me to tell Ania anything?"

Marin lifted her head and looked back to the light. “She knows how I feel. She *is* my daughter.”

Then she stepped away. No one moved to stop her and no one said a thing. Marin clambered over the barricade of bodies. Inside the wall the geyser of light felt so close. It seemed to envelope everything but she wasn’t inside it yet. Marin stared at it, and for a few stuttering moments thought she saw Cade Skywalker, suspended in the light, still locked in struggle with powers beyond knowing.

Best not keep him waiting. Without hesitation or fear, Marin stepped forward. She was ready to understand the mystery.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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When she entered the place that was no place, Marin had only the memory of Cade's words to guide her. She recalled how, on entering the Cosmic Force, his mortal mind had processed its incomprehensible power into the image of the convocation hall of the now-destroyed Ossus temple.

That was how she knew that she was not, in truth, standing on the salt-flat desert of Loracan, on the edge of Mandalorian space. Her surroundings were unbearably vivid. Sunlight was blinding on the great plain. Hot wind tingled on her face and she could even smell the saline reek in the air, stronger than any ocean's. And, worse than all those things, she could see what lay directly ahead of her. The Mandalorian freighter had left a black streak through the salt-pan's white as it crashed. Smoke still rose from its body, wrecked but mostly intact. She could even side the circular side-hatch through which she had stepped through nearly fifty long years ago.

She had no idea why the Force had brought her back to this, perhaps the worst moment of her life. If she hadn't stepped through that hatch, if she hadn't called on vengeful hate to kill Kaynar Auchs in front of his son Yaga, there was no telling how her story- and the galaxy's- might have been different.

She was standing now at the very start of the straight black scorch-line. She wanted no closer to the Auchs' crashed ship; instead she stepped away, onto white salt-flakes that crinkled beneath boots that were not boots.

As soon as she was out of the black, the desert attacked her. The air, already hot, became scalding. Whirlwinds kicked up the desert's skin and turned salt-flecks into tiny missiles that

pounded her face, tearing skin that was not skin and drawing blood that was not blood. Marin found herself surrounded on all sides by minds that were vast and ancient and powerful, singular identities but also the parts of a whole. Blindly, afraid for the life she'd just given up, she staggered back into the freighter's wake. In an instant, the wind and sand fell away.

Marin didn't understand. It was as though she'd stepped into somewhere that had been prepared for her and made safe.

*Strangely enough, you've got the Sith to thank for that, a voice that was no voice told her. It was soft, gentle, female. She knew it as Tasha Ryo's. With eyes that were not eyes, Marin saw a single shrouded figure standing on the far end of the crash-line, in front of the freighter's still-sealed hatch.*

*Is this the Cosmic Force?* Marin asked Tasha. *Is that where I am?*

*Yes and no, Tasha said. The Sith tore a hole in the Cosmic Force. The Whills couldn't fix it themselves so they created a Skywalker. Anakin destroyed Darth Sidious and removed his stain on the Living Force but there was still a hole in the Cosmic that stayed unfilled. The cloaked figure extended a hand, gesturing to the black trail. This safe place was made by Sidious himself. Ironic, isn't it?*

*What do you want me to do here?*

*You know where you need to go,* Tasha said, and behind her, unwilling, the hatch to Kaynar Auch's freighter swung open.

Marin froze in place. She feared what lay beyond that door even more than she feared the Whills' punishing desert-storm.

*I know it's difficult,* Tasha said, soothing. *But this is the only way ahead for you. And there is no way back.*

Marin knew it was true; despite that, feet still planted, she looked behind her. Past the black scorch-mark there was only desert, white and hostile. She could still feel the wind and heat crowding her; if she stepped off the path it would overwhelm and destroy her.

There was no way back; no way to Ania. Marin faced the freighter again. The hatch hung open, black and beckoning. Tasha Ryo was gone.

The only way was ahead. Marin stepped toward the freighter feeling small and alone. Through the hatch she saw nothing; no interior running-lights, just pure blackness. The Force gave her

no intimation of what lay beyond. Maybe Kaynar and Yaga Auchs would be waiting; maybe it was something else entirely. She cursed the Force as she once had been being cruel and inscrutable, but the Force was all she had. She's surrendered to it. This was the fate she'd made for herself.

She stood before the portal and saw only black. With no place else to go, Marin stepped inside.

And a new presence was with her. She knew it instantly even though she hadn't felt it for almost fifty years. It was sweet and bitter, and it filled her with sorrow and strength. If she'd had eyes Marin would have cried.

*Vitor, she said, It's been a while.*

And the world beyond the doorway resolved out of black. Without eyes she saw the awful scene in the Fountain Palace on Hapes, preserved in memory for nearly half a century, but now she was witnessing it through a roving eye. She watched a beautiful, deadly young Sith queen twisting her double-bladed lightsaber, smashing both blades down on a red-haired Jedi more than twice her age: Allana Solo Djo. Vitor Fel- preserved as in memory, so young- was standing to one side holding the sparking ruins of his lightsaber. Marin saw herself there too, pulling herself back over the railing she'd been thrown past. Scarlet *beskar* armor, inheritance from the dead, protected her body but her so-young face was exposed.

Marin could see her own shock as the Sith knocked Allana's weapon out of her hand, backstepped, and prepared her saber for a thrust through the heart. And she watched, as helpless and frozen as her young self, as Vitor lunged ahead and allowed the blow meant for Allana to take him instead. Strength failing but standing firm, he grabbed the Sith's weapon in both hands, freezing her in place so Allana could deliver the ending blow.

With the vision's eye, Marin watched him smile in dying triumph.

*I don't regret that, Vitor told her. Do you?*

*I did for a long time, Marin admitted. So long. I should have saved you.*

*Then I couldn't have saved Allana. The Force granted me that vision. It told me what my destiny was and only through knowing could I fulfill it. What you just saw was the defining moment of my life.*

And maybe, she thought, of her own. *But which Force? What told you to die? The Whills? This Unifying Force?*

*The Force is the Force. It's layered but whole.*

*Then why are we struggling now? Why am I being attacked?*

*The Whills sense you stand with Cade Skywalker. He is trying to tear a hole through the Force, to restore it fully to the galaxy beyond.*

*To everyone?*

*Yes. Either all the Force awakens or none of it.*

*Then we'll change everything.*

*Does that frighten you?*

*Doesn't it frighten you?*

She felt warmth from Vitor, as though he was grinning. *I'm beyond fear, Marin, and a lot of other things too.*

*And you're going to help us in this?*

*I already am. We already are. Even now a line of Skywalkers stands around Cade, guarding and protecting him, holding his unfinished bridge erect.*

*He said he was tearing a hole.*

*And building a bridge. Destruction is creation.*

Vitor filled her with soothing, passing on the feeling of wisdom and confidence that felt so unlike the young man she'd known fifty years ago. Visions promising death had tortured him and he'd raged against the Force itself, but now he had embraced it fully.

*Is this, she asked, what we were made to do? As Skywalkers?*

*The Whills made us to plug the hole in the Cosmic Force and bring balance to the Living. Maybe the Unifying Force worked through the Whills to make this moment. Maybe this is what we do, on our own. Does it matter?*

She wanted to say it did, but somehow, in this place beyond place, there seemed no contradiction between acting her own will and that of the Force. She'd placed herself in opposition to it for so long, but finally, she realized the only way to understand the mystery was to place herself at its mercy. Only then could she know the peace as Vitor had.

*There are others who want to help you, he said. Let me introduce you to one.*

And Marin felt a new consciousness brush hers. It was unfamiliar but strong in the Force, a Skywalker no doubt. It

was weary but dignified, calm but impassioned, bent by suffering but made for resilience. It was the kind of soul that could carry the weight of the entire galaxy. And, Marin sensed, it once had.

*This is our great-grandmother, Vitor told her. This is Leia.*

Wonder filled Marin as a new vision came. She saw a broad-windowed office looking out on Coruscant in flames. Skyscrapers toppled and organic drop ships fell from the sky like meteors. Old starfighters and Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers chased each other through the veils of smoke that blackened the sky. It was the end of the world, an apocalypse unlike anything even Marin had seen in her long and troubled life.

And standing in front of the window, looking out on the slaughter, was one small woman, brown hair streaked with gray, face heavy with intimate grief. She spoke into an audio transceiver that broadcast her words across the besieged planet and beyond. She promised it was not the end and urged all the people of the New Republic- the government she had built- to hold to hope in their darkest hour.

*It was my darkest hour too, Leia told her. The voice was husky but soothing; a little, Marin thought, like her grandmother Jaina's. My planet was falling. My government had collapsed. And my son Anakin had just fallen in battle. I wanted only to run and hide and mourn in private, but I could not. I had to stand, face the destruction, and rally those I could to our cause.*

*That's awful, Marin said. You should have been able to be alone with your grief.*

*I've had many griefs. And I've always had to stand up again. I lost my other son too, my parents, my homeworld, and too many friends to count. But I always stood up to face the next challenge. Do you know why that was, Marin?*

*She felt the answer. Because you weren't alone.*

*I had my brother. My husband. My daughter Jaina. And you have us.*

*But what am I supposed to do here? Am I supposed to fight? I don't understand what the Whills are, or what the Unifying Force is. How can I succeed when I don't know how to win?*

And a third voice, like Leia's but more familiar, said *You can fight without fighting. There's more to life than being a sword.*

Marin knew that was what they'd called her grandmother: the Sword of the Jedi. She braced herself for the scene to come. It seemed to her the defining moment of Jaina's life could only when she plunged a lightsaber into her brother's chest and killed her beloved twin.

But the vision that enfolded Marin was totally different. Instead of a vicious battle she was surrounded by lush verdure. Sunlight dappled layers of leaves that rustled in wind and birds chattered high overhead. A grassy clearing sat surrounded by high forest and through its gap once could see the faded bulge of a scarlet gas giant. She'd seen that swirling red world once too, from the misty jungles of Yavin 4.

Sitting on the clearing were three teenagers: two boys and a girl. They reclined in the grass, alone together, savoring peace in silence. Main had only known Jaina as a small, severe, white-haired old woman. The smiling youth stunned her.

*My life could have been defined by many things, Jaina told her. By my killing Jacen. By watching Anakin die. By burying my lightsaber in the sands, marrying Jag, or watching Arlen and Davek grow up. But I choose to be defined by this.*

*You were young and innocent. Your brothers were still you.*

*My brothers have always been with me. Even when they were dead. Even when one had gone dark. And here we are all together, and all at our best.*

Marin realized the sweetness of the vision, but she was an old woman and she'd learned to look on childhood nostalgia with shame. It denied all the harshness of adulthood and tried to hide in the past.

*I am not hiding, Jaina said. I am celebrating. No life fulfills its every potential. We all lose things and we all suffer regrets. But we can define ourselves by defeats, or we can define them by aspiration. I chose to hope.*

As Jaina said it Marin knew the moment that had defined her own life. She'd just seen it: Vitor impaled on a Sith blade while she'd watched helplessly, despite knowing this would come and swearing to her cousin that she'd save him. Defeat had estranged Marin from the Force, and estrangement had cost her a chance to raise Ania. All her life she'd been defined by regret. All the names she'd taken- Fel, Solo, Skirata- had been donned to fix past mistakes.



*You are all of those things and none of them, Jaina told her. You're Marin Skywalker too.*

One more regret bit at Marin, as old as her ache for Vitor. She had to get it out. *I'm sorry I wasn't there to see you before you died. I was so far away. I was doing things I should never have done.*

*Don't you know I'd forgive you that?*

*I did,* Marin admitted. Through she put on a hard front, her grandmother could forgive anything.

*Then it's time you forgive yourself,* Jaina said.

Marin found that here, with Jaina, Vitor, Leia, and the other Skywalkers at her side, she just might be able to. So she asked them *If I'm not defined by regret, what does define me?*

*Now,* said Cade. *And now is always.*

And suddenly she was back inside the Fountain Palace on Hapes, standing on one edge of the bridge Vitor had died on. Vitor was gone; so was Allana and the Sith they'd slain. Half of the bridge was missing too. Marin stood near the platform's jutting edge, looking at the unreachable door on the far side of the gap. There was a glow there, strong and pure, greater than any light she'd known but wholly unreachable.

And standing beside Marin was Cade Skywalker.

*Are we safe here?* She asked him.

*Safe enough. The other Skywalkers are helping us, pushing the tear the Sith made a little wider. But we still need to get over there, to the Unifying Force.* Cade gestured to the distant blaze, and she caught a hint of characteristic smugness. *We're not just filling the hole. We're tearing it wide open.*

*How can we reach the other side?*

*You're getting closer already,* said a new voice. Marin recognized it too, and suddenly Tasha was on her other side, peering at the light with a longing that matched Marin's own.

*Do not fight. Do not struggle,* said the Je'daii. *Just be what you have always been and you will reach it.*

And for the first time since entering this strange plane, Marin felt the whispered breath of pure Force, unlike anything she'd known before.

*It still feels so far away,* she said.

*It is,* Cade told her. *But it's getting closer. We still need a little help.*

Marin's peace faltered. She felt she'd attained something she'd sought all her mortal life, but their ultimate goal was still beyond them. She wondered what else was required to reach it.

She wondered if her daughter would have to pay a price.

And so there was no longer peace for Marin, nor joy or triumph.

Most of all there was no bridge. No bridge yet.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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Treetops rushed them and turned to blurs as the assault shuttle shot above the forest canopy, so close Ania was afraid they'd crash and burn against a stray jutting trunk. Sora Auchs said they were flying low to limit detection from the TIE Predators prowling high in Zonama Sekot's skies, but she couldn't shake the anxiety that the ex-Mandalorian was trying to get her killed.

The shuttle's cockpit was crowded with bodies, including the two armored pilots, Sora herself, Ania, Marasiah, and Azlyn. Ania leaned forward to watch the sky, and her heart fell when she spotted a plume of smoke on the horizon.

"That's our target." Sora eyed Ania. "You've better brace yourself for anything."

Ania swallowed and glanced at Marasiah. In a near-whisper she asked, "What do you feel?"

Her cousin drew brows together, concentrating as she searched the Force for signs of life. Ania ached to have that power herself; if Jao had been hurt or killed she'd never forgive herself for letting Eli hijack *Free Agent*.

Marasiah hadn't answered by the time the shuttle pulled up and performed a slow, careful circle around the crash site. Ania leaned over the pilot's shoulder and when she looked down her heart fell. The Mon Calamari ship had cut a black slash through the forest on its way down, and the impact site was a ball of burning wreckage, barely recognizable as an ovoid spacecraft. Flamed leaped almost high enough to catch the mercenaries' ship, and it was clear the entire shuttle had been enveloped in flame.

"Nobody could've survived that," the pilot said brusquely.

Ania looked to Sora. "We have to go down and check. Even if—" Her voice caught in her throat. "Even if it's just bodies."

"If they went down with that thing they'll be burned to a cinder. And we can't stay long. Those TIEs will spot us soon, if they haven't already."

"We can't just *leave* them down there."

Sora wasn't going to bother arguing. She turned to the pilot and opened her mouth to order him away, but was stopped by Marasiah's hand on her shoulder.

The former empress said, "There's someone alive. I can feel it."

"In *that* fireball?"

"No. But they're close."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Pull up. Give me a better view."

The pilot looked to Sora for permission; reluctantly, she nodded. He wheeled the assault shuttle higher and performed another slow circle, tracing a broader circumference around the crash site. Marasiah took Ania's spot behind the pilot, staring downward, but it seemed like she was looking not at the woods but through them.

Sora was looking anxious, checking the co-pilot's scanners for signs of incoming TIEs. Just when it looked like she was going to give another retreat order, Marasiah stabbed a finger at a patch of trees. "Right there. Take us down."

"There's no place to land," grouched the pilot.

Marasiah turned to Sora. "Your people can do aerial deployment."

"We can. It's not the best for bringing up injured."

Ania wasn't going to deal with Sora's deliberations anymore. "We'll find a way," she declared. "Azlyn, let's go. Anybody else we can get would be great."

Ania hurried out of the cockpit and down to the shuttle's main hold, not daring a hopeful look behind her. A dozen Black Spear soldiers were down by the landing ramp when it opened on cool wind and treetops, and none of them moved to help Ania and Azlyn deploy.

She wasn't going to lose Jao because some damn mercs were too lazy to earn their pay. "Come on, *shabuire*," she snapped,

“Give us some fiberchord at least!”

The swear lit a small fire under them. They pulled two strings of cable attached to ceiling-mounted reels and gave the handles to Ania and Azlyn. This would have to do. As they got ready to slide down the landing ramp and deploy, new footfalls entered the hold, and Ania looked up to see both Sora and Marasiah entering.

The mercenary leader pointed at three of her soldiers. “You, you, and you, go down with them. Ollis, bring a medkit too. You don’t know what you’re dealing with. And you-” She grabbed Marasiah’s arm. “Keep your royal butt on this ship. If you can, use some of that Force-magic to reel them back inside. You understand?”

Marasiah nodded curtly. Ania, simply glad her cousin was lending a hand at last, waited for the other three soldiers to pull down their own fiberchords. When everything looked ready she was the first one to jump. Ania gripped the handles and tight as she dropped straight down into the forest. Something- a gust of wind or help from Marasiah- nudged her away from a bora tree’s thickest patch of needle-pointed leaves. Other leaves poked at her clothes and made small slashes on her face as she was dropped to the forest floor.

As soon as she got down, a laser bolt sizzle over her shoulder. Ania dropped and shouted, “Hold fire! Hold fire! It’s me, Ania! We’re friendly!”

As Azlyn and the others hit the ground, a voice bounced through the dense tree-trunks. “What ship is that? Where did it come from?”

“Master Val, is that you?” called Azlyn.

A short pause, then, “Master *Rae*? I thought you were dead.”

Ania didn’t have time for chit-chat. She scampered through the forest, looking in every direction before she caught the source of the voices. She sprinted toward it, dodging one tree and then another, before finding two bodies pressed against a jutting rock.

One of them was a human dressed in a blue senatorial guards’ uniform. The man lowered his blaster to reveal a bearded face, scratched by cuts and darkened but dirt, familiar but not Jao’s. Beside him stirred a Mon Calamari who could only be Senator Gahan.

“Where’s Jao?” Ania snapped. “What happened to him?”

Yalta Val dropped his pistol to the ground. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if he made it out. Or Saaraï.”

Azlyn came in alongside Ania and helped the senator to her feet. “We found the shuttle crash. How did you two survive?”

Rising on his own, Val said, “Trust a former snubfighter pilot to install ejection seats in her personal shuttle, even after she turns senator.”

“But what about Jao?” Ania pressed desperately. “Where did he *go*?”

“I’m sorry. I could barely stay conscious when we ejected.”

“I think he and Saaraï escaped,” slurred the senator. She had a nasty, bleeding gash on her bulbous cranium and looked even worse-off than Sauk.

“Then we still have to look for him.” Ania looked at the three mercenaries, staring at her like restaurant staff waiting for an order. She snapped her fingers and said, “Come *on*, people! Get them back in the ship! We’ve got two more to find!”

The soldiers helped reel Val and Gahan back into the ship. As they waited for the cables to be lowered back down, Azlyn warned Ania, “You can’t get your hopes up right now. It looks like those two were lucky to survive.”

“Trust me, my hopes are *not* up,” Ania scowled. Her mind was cycling through possible ways Jao could have gotten maimed or killed; there were too many to count. “That’s all the more reason we’ve got to bust our butts and find them.”

Azlyn didn’t argue. When the tables came back down they stuck feet and hands into the holds and allowed themselves to be pulled upward toward the shuttle. It occurred to Ania that Sora hadn’t left them in the forest to starve or shot them like sitting nunas, so that was one small thing to be thankful for.

As soon as they clambered back into the hold, Ania got to her feet and wheeled on Marasiah, standing in the far corner. Taking her cousin by the shoulders she said, “We have to keep looking. Jao’s not down there.”

“I noticed.” The other woman glanced at the medic looking over Val and Gahan.

“Well, use your damn Force powers and *find* him.”

“Ania, he might not even be alive, and my uncle’s-”

“Just because you lost your crown doesn’t mean you can’t

still *do* things,” Ania snapped. “He’s depending on. *I’m* depending on you. *We need* you!”

She actually shook Marasiah at the end; the former empress, still not used to disrespect, stared for a long second before saying, “Of course. I’ll do what I can.”

Releasing those shoulders, realizing how hard she’d gripped them, Ania said, “Thank you. That’s all I ask.”

The resistance fleet was sparing nothing as it hurled itself toward Zonama Sekot. It was the kind of large-scale operation they simply hadn’t attempted before, but necessity had forced them to it. The verdant swell of Zonama Sekot had filled Anj Dahl’s cockpit; her sensors marked nearly one hundred starfighters charging in a wave alongside her, with a dozen capital ships lagging behind. Her eyes picked out a single star destroyer, the regent’s own *Jagged Fel*, tiny against the green spread of the planet.

She knew there was more than that: three star destroyers and a host of support ships, more than capable of tackling the resistance fleet, were on the other side of the planet and hurrying around to defend the flagship. But the resistance had Gar Stazi on their side, and the simple fact made Anj swell with confidence.

Her sensors also showed that the *Jagged Fel* was hovering on the edge of the planet’s atmospheric envelope. Even though help was on its way, it could find itself pinned down against the planet with no room for escape, and she was surprised the flagship wasn’t attempting to pull out of the gravity well. It almost looked like Chalk was waiting on something, though Anj couldn’t imagine what.

Then she got her answer. The *Jagged Fel* released a volley of emerald laserfire from its ventral batteries. The powerful plasma bolts dropped into Zonama Sekot’s atmosphere and seemed aimed for a location on its southern hemisphere.

And then, seconds after they’d been fired, the bolts disappeared, leaving no trace behind. Anj was still far out, but she caught the flash of some anomalous energy reading a few kilometers above the planet’s surface. Her first thought was that some defensive shield had deflected the *Jagged Fel*’s assault, but she caught no energy scatter typical with such a

shield. It was like the turbolaser bolts had been swallowed whole, leaving no trace.

“Lead, this is Five,” said a voice on her headset. “Do you have any idea what that was?”

She shook her head. “I heard this planet has unusual ways to protect itself. I guess we just saw one.”

“I heard this thing can even bust up fleets if it wants to,” muttered Rogue Seven. “Creepy.”

Anj checked her scanners again. “Maybe it won’t need to. That destroyer’s gaining altitude. Looks like it’s pumping power to topside shields too. They’re getting ready to fight us instead of the planet.”

“Bring it on. We’ve got accounts to settle,” said Nine, one of the ones who’d been with her since the massacre of Jhoram Bey’s fleet.

Anj understood his anger, but she knew Chalk would bring it hard. Her sensors picked up some TIEs heading their way, and the first of the Federation picket ships were making themselves visible around Zonama Sekot’s ecliptic. Even with help from the Black Spear mercs and the advantage of surprise, this was going to be a hard fight.

Her comm board lit up with a wide-band transmission and Anj tapped the link open. Just when she needed it most, Gar Stazi’s voice came on, deep and firm. “This is the admiral,” he said. “Hogrum Chalk has refused my offer to surrender and insists on a fight. Admiral Yage’s vessels will soon be in position to help him. Our main priority is to take the *Jagged Fel*. Break down its defenses, cripple it, and destroy it if we absolutely have to. Our second priority is to protect Zonama Sekot from orbital bombardment. Our third priority is to defend against Yage’s fleet, but that is subordinate to the other two. *Chalk* is our enemy today, and we can end his reign of lies right here, right now. Fight brave and fight well. Stazi, out.”

It was hard not to feel a surge of confidence after that. It brought Anj back to the good old days- and she could hardly believe she was thinking of them as such- when they’d taken on Darth Krayt’s evil empire and won.

But today was today, and they were fighting a different war. Anj ordered her pilots to spread S-foils to attack position and pick targets from the approaching TIEs. Even as her computer



got a lock her eyes were on Chalk's star destroyer, a wedge silhouetted against the living green of a planet that had already done the impossible before her eyes.

To herself, Anj whispered, "May the Force be with us," and leaped into the new fight.

There was life in the forest beneath her, strong and sentient and also familiar. It was headstrong and stubborn but driven by an idealism that transcended the strictures of government and the necessity of politics. Marasiah recognize that life as Jao Assam's, and she directed the shuttle pilot to fly toward it.

"Are you sure it's him?" Ania asked. She hovered on Marasiah's shoulder, bleeding tension in the Force.

"It's him." She looked to her cousin. "You and Azlyn should get ready to retrieve."

Ania nodded, started for the cockpit exit, then spun on a heel and added, "Thank you. So much."

Then she was gone. *Thank me when it's over*, Marasiah thought. It felt strange to rely on the Force so much. She hadn't trusted it in years, both for how it had failed her and how it enabled her darkest self. She'd only touched it here out of necessity and was frankly surprised to find that nothing had gone wrong so far.

The mercenaries' shuttle swung low over the area of forest Marasiah had marked. The pilot killed engines, kicked on repulsors, and set them to hover. "Landing ramp open," he reported. "Deploying now."

Standing beside Marasiah, Sora Auchs glanced tensely at the sensor readout. This whole mission, the mercenary had been a flux of conflicting emotions. Marasiah knew the woman's story in the loosest sense; her dead father had been the Mandalore, and while Marin and Ania hadn't killed him directly she might see them as accidentally culpable. And Marasiah could feel the ex-Mandalorian weighing the parts of herself that desired retribution with the parts that wanted to do her duty as leader of her company.

Marasiah found herself with unexpected sympathy. She'd failed her duty and fled from black desire, but she wished that she could have fulfilled the former while defeating the latter.

Fortunately, Sora's sense of duty also seemed to be winning

out. She nodded approvingly when the pilot reported Ania and Azlyn had descended into the forest.

"How many are down there? One or two?" Sora asked Marasiah.

She stretched out with the Force a little more. "Two. I think."

The mercenary's shot her another one of the same looks she'd been giving since Marasiah came aboard. It asked what the hells a former empress was doing on her shuttle, and what that woman was capable of.

Marasiah didn't have a good answer to either, so she let the questions linger.

"Boss, we're in trouble," the co-pilot said. "TIEs finally found us."

Sora and Marasiah both looked at the sensor board. Sure enough, a flight of four TIE Predators was diving toward them from high above the starboard flank.

"Get us in the air," said Sora. "Shields up, evasive maneuvers. *Now*."

The ship surged beneath them, carrying them up. Before Marasiah could even ask, Sora snapped, "We'll come back for them later, if we can. Right now we need to clear off the TIEs."

The assault shuttle was armed and armored but it was not fast, and the TIEs were on them quickly. Laserfire splattered on their aft shields and Marasiah braced herself against the cockpit walls. The co-pilot manned the gunnery turrets and began spraying return fire, but the TIE Predators were nimble. One took a clipping shot to the port solar panel and went spiraling into the forest below but the others kept on the target tight.

"Just our luck," grunted the pilot, "We get chased by the only Imp pilots that can shoot straight."

"You must be so proud, Majesty," Sora muttered angrily.

Marasiah wasn't proud. For a long time she'd thought she wouldn't mind dying, but if she was destroyed then Ania and Jao were doomed too. She'd gotten used to thinking of herself as a failure but the idea of failing people who'd given so much for her- not because of what she was but *who*- stung like she hadn't expected. In successfully locating Jao and Val with the Force she felt she'd regained some scrap of the agency she once had. But she was on verge of losing that again.

It made her angry. Marasiah wondered if she could summon that anger and direct it as never before. She wondered if she could rend the atmosphere in their wake and devour all three TIEs with a Force storm. As laserfire continued to rock weakening shields, she even wondered what that might feel like. She wondered if she'd experience a bit of the pilots' dying pain as they were torn apart by powers they could never understand. She wondered if she'd enjoy that moment of absolute power.

Another blast rocked the shuttle especially hard, and the pilot shouted, "Shields are almost gone!"

Sora grabbed Marasiah by a shoulder. "Dammit, can't you *do* something you *shabla* Imp *hut'uun*? They're *your* pilots!"

"They're my *uncle's*!" Marasiah snapped back. But there was no way of knowing what they'd do if she tried to comm them. They might refuse hails. They might obey an order from their rightful empress. They might shoot her down regardless.

But maybe there was another way.

She shook her shoulder free and backstepped from Sora. "Give me a moment. Let me think."

"Don't take more than one or we'll be dead."

Marasiah didn't have to be told. She stepped into the back of the cockpit, pressed her shoulders against the bulkhead and closed her eyes. She reached out with the Force but instead of giving in to her anger and despair, which would have been so easy, she contained it best she could and tried to focus on the minds of the three attacking pilots themselves.

They were cool and focused, acting and reacting to the shuttle's movements, perfectly intent on completing their mission. Yet beyond that she felt lingering doubt; none of them were sure why they were here, who they were shooting at, or even what this planet was. Her uncle hadn't explained any of that. He'd just sent them to kill and to die.

She might have reached for the comm, but Marasiah decided she didn't need to. Instead she allowed her own thoughts to flow into the minds of the pilot. She'd been trained in Force suggestion- all Imperial Knights were- but she'd never used it on someone she couldn't lay eyes on, let alone three people at once.

Yet she tried anyway. Marasiah felt their minds and sent them

all a single message: *Mission Accomplished. Go Back.* She repeated it over and over, like she was driving a spike into their minds. Nothing seemed to change, and her frustration mounted. As empress she'd commanded millions of soldiers with her words, but her thoughts couldn't even order three pilots. The Force was failing her again.

And then she felt them leave. The TIEs broke formation, peeled into perfect hundred-and-eighty-degree turns, and soared away.

"They just ran!" the pilot explained in disbelief.

"What do you mean they ran?" asked Sora, incredulous.

"They're gone! They just... flew away."

"They didn't call for reinforcements?"

"There's no incoming on our sensors, Boss."

Sora turned from the console and looked back at Marasiah. Her scowl softened just a bit. "Whatever you did back there, it worked."

"Don't thank me," Marasiah said. She didn't need it. Just getting through to those pilots and willingly using the Force for good instead of harm was all the satisfaction she could ask for. "Go find Ania. She should be ready for pickup now."

After getting shot at the first time she went down to rescue someone, Ania really should have been prepared for it to happen again. Instead she barely missed the first laser-blast as it sizzled over her head, and she frantically blurted out, "Hold fire, Jao, it's me!"

A long heartbeat followed, then a surprised, hopeful voice. "Ania?"

She got to her feet and trotted through the brush to the source of the voice. Her eyes marked a bulky starship ejection chair slumped against the side of a thick tree-trunk, and Jao standing over it with a blaster in one hand and nasty cuts all over his face.

Ania didn't care. She ran right into him and slammed him a half-step back with a firm round-the-waist hug. Once Jao disentangled himself he gasped, "Dammit, Ania, how did you get here?"

"What, you didn't hear that big loud shuttle drop us off?"

"I heard TIEs chasing it away."

Ania had heard that too. She looked up but only saw flecks of blue sky through the dense canopy. "That was one of the mercenary ships we came on. They're armed and armored. They can take care of themselves." And they had Marasiah aboard. She prayed that counted for something too.

"Miss, are you all right? Can you stand up?"

That was Azlyn, and Ania looked past Jao to see the figure still sitting in the crashed ejection seat. Azlyn took one of Saarai's blue hands and started helping her to her feet. The Chagrian's legs bucked and Ania's gut lurched to see her entire right arm missing from the elbow down. There should have been blood gushing from that wound but she noticed a few sparks shed from shorn machinery.

Saarai noticed her gaze. Warily the Chagrian said, "It's okay. I've lost that one before."

Ania looked back at the ejection seat and saw the blue synthflesh hand of a mechanical arm stuck between it and the tree-trunk. Saarai might not have been suffering from severe blood loss but, like Jao, her face was laced by tiny cuts carved by needle-tip bora leaves, and patches of skin were darkened by burns. Nothing a little bacta wouldn't fix, assuming they got out of here. Ania heard the faint crackle of laser bolts high above, plus the howl of TIEs, but from the forest floor her eyes availed her of nothing.

"Let's see if we can find a clearing," Azlyn suggested. "Someplace easy to evac from."

"Good plan," said Ania. "Can you two move?"

She looked at Saarai as she spoke. The Chagrian drew straight and said, "I've survived worse."

"Then we move," said Azlyn. "Come on."

As they started toward the nearest patch of visible sunlight, Jao asked Ania, "How did you find us, anyway?"

"Got a little help from the Force, she grinned." He stared in shock and she corrected, "Not me, *di'kut*, Marasiah."

"Then you can't feel anything here?"

Ania didn't answer. She thought back to that brilliant pillar of light, which her mother had looked at with a mystified attention. Marin and Khat Lah had said they could feel Cade inside of it. Ania didn't know what it meant to feel anything through the Force, but staring at that light she'd had a knowing,

deep down, that Cade *was* there, and he was brazenly struggling against something bigger than himself, fueled by anger and sustained by stubbornness.

In short, Cade being Cade.

She had no idea *how* she'd known. The fact hadn't even come to her in realization. It was like she'd known instantly the second she'd laid eyes on that light-pillar. Maybe that had been the Force talking to her. It made sense that if it spoke anywhere, it would have been there.

Her silence was loud, and Jao asked, "What happened on *Free Agent*? Did someone hijack your ship?"

"Yeah. Long story," Ania growled. She was trying not to think about AG-37. She had no idea if the droid could be repaired but once this was over, she'd do everything to get him working again.

"What happened to the Tho Yor?" asked Saara. Azlyn was standing beside her, one arm around her waist to help her walk.

"That's another long story. In fact, I can't explain that one." Ania looked to Jao. "But it's like what Kyra told us about. That... explosion of light, like she saw on that weird planet."

"There's one *here*?" he gasped.

"Yeah. And Cade went inside."

Jao was too shocked to speak. The opening for reply was suddenly drowned by the roar of starship engines. These were the shuttle's, not from TIEs, and hot thrust blown by repulsors jostled the bora leaves overhead. Ania said a silent prayer Sora was still feeling un-vengeful and waited for help to come.

This time two mercenaries came down on fiberchord cables. They helped Jao and Saara up first, then allowed Ania and Azlyn to be reeled through the forest canopy. By the time Ania crawled into the ship's hold and the landing ramp sealed, the mercenaries' field medic was giving Saara a look-over. The Chagrian, however, was watching Marasiah on the other side of the chamber with a wary look Ania couldn't explain.

The ex-empress wasn't paying attention. She stood with Yalta Val, Azlyn and Jao, her three ex-knights, with an expression that looked satisfied and even close to happy. Playfully, Ania came up behind Jao and nudged him in the side. "You should thank your old boss. She's the one who found you in the forest."

"I know. Master Val just explained." Jao flushed a little. "Thank you, Majesty."

Marasiah's almost-smile wilted. "I'm not your majesty. But... you're welcome."

"The mercenaries said we're going back to base camp," Val said. "Where is that exactly?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Azlyn said seriously. "And it might be better to show you before we try to explain."

"I think you should try anyway." Ania pulled away from Jao, toward her cousin. "A quick word?"

Reluctantly, Marasiah walked with her into the corridor past the hold, leaving the three ex-Knights to talk. Ania said, "That was good, what you did back there. More than good. Did you convince the TIEs to ditch too?"

Marasiah blinked in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. But the lack of booming explosions was kind of noteworthy." She tilted her head and smiled. "So you talked 'em out of it, did you?"

"Not talk. I used the Force."

"Then you didn't actually hail them over the comm?" Disappointment crept in. "It was all mind-powers?"

"If you want to call them that, yes."

"I get it now."

Marasiah frowned. "What would you have me do? If I declare myself against Hogram now I'll start another civil war. I don't want to cause that suffering and I don't *want* to be empress. I don't deserve to be. I already failed once."

It was an argument Ania knew she'd never win, so she didn't even try. "Maybe there's another way. Your uncle doesn't deserve to get away with all he's done, either."

"I agree." Her voice dropped to a low growl. "But I won't sacrifice galactic peace for vengeance."

"Listen, before we dropped I heard some of the mercs say that a resistance fleet had just popped up in orbit. They're fighting your uncle right now." Ania leaned closer. "They say Gar Stazi's in command."

Marasiah's eyes lost focus as she stared into the future, calculating possibilities.

"If the two *real* leaders of the Federation want to stage a joint reappearance, well, I'm sure it'd make some waves," Ania told

her. "Or maybe you have another plan. Either way, it doesn't seem like a chance to waste."

Marasiah regarded her carefully. "Since when did *you* care about the state of galactic politics?"

"It's more like politics won't leave me alone."

"Indeed," her cousin muttered, and stared into the future again.

Ania left her to think on it. She made her way down the corridor to the cockpit, where Sora Auchs was still perched over the back of her pilot's chair. The shuttle had gained altitude and was performing a sweeping curve over the forest.

"Are we heading back to the mountaintop?" asked Ania.

Sora looked over-the-shoulder at her. "You've got what you want, don't you?"

"Yes. I'll make sure you get paid for this. Really well."

"Good," Sora said curtly, but her eyes lingered on Marin. "I have a question."

"If this is about Marasiah, you should ask her, not me."

"No. This is about your mother."

"Ah." Ania had been afraid of that.

Sora hugged arms across her chest; it make her look defensive and vulnerable, no longer a tough mercenary. "She told me that she didn't send the recording of my father and Darth Nihl to Thorum Rhal. She said your cousin Liem did it all on his own. Is that true?"

"I don't know anything about what Liem did. I haven't even seen him since Bakura. But I know she was upset about your dad's death. She intended to honor her agreement with him. She wanted to put all that behind her."

Sora breathed deep and let it out. "Of course you'd say that."

"If you weren't going to believe me, why ask?"

"I think you're telling the truth. As you know it, anyway."

"It *is* the truth," Ania insisted, and Sora seemed a tiny bit assuaged. "What were you going to do, kill her if I said no?"

The mercenary looked away, through the viewport toward the mountain in the fast-nearing distance. Softly she said, "I don't think that would have been an option."

When shuttle dropped out of *Paramount's* landing bay the inertia and sudden kick-in of the smaller ship's artificial



gravity made Kyra's stomach leap inside her. That, or it could have been nerves. After all she'd been through she should have been immune to nervousness, but this was no ordinary deployment. If it came out right, it would be even bigger than the mission to free Admiral Stazi.

Kyra had been crammed into the shuttle's rear passenger hold for twenty minutes, along with the rest of the ground troops, but according to *Paramount's* flight control the starfighter squadrons had secured a clear pathway down to the planet. The regent's flagship had apparently pulled into upper orbit and, despite taking damage, was now being protected by two more star destroyers, which made Stazi's goal of ending Chalk's reign more difficult.

She was disappointed, but only a little. The war against Chalk suddenly seemed very small compared to the planet below and the people she cared about who were on it.

As the shuttle sailed clear through space, unjarred by enemy fire or evasive maneuvers, the man strapped in next to her asked, "Can you feel anything yet?"

The desire was plain on Ganner Kreig's eyes. He'd insisted on coming to Zonama Sekot himself, even though he needed hours more in the bacta tank. His face was still pale and his eyes sunken; he emanated desperate need.

"I'm not sure yet," Kyra admitted. "There's this... presence beneath us. I can feel that. There's so much life."

Seated on the bench along the opposite wall, Karrashchakkuk gave a wistful roar. He told her that Zonama Sekot's collective consciousness could be hard to sense in the Force, but once you did it was beautiful.

"Maybe we'll all feel it soon enough," Asaak Dan said. "I just wish I knew what Skywalker was doing down there."

Kyra was concerned about Skywalker, and moreso about Ania and Jao. She hadn't been there when they'd needed her because she'd been off waging an impersonal war for the galaxy's greater good, because she'd thought that was what the Force demanded of her. Now she had no idea what the Force wanted but she knew damned well what *she* wanted: to look them in the eye and apologize, to Ania especially.

Kyra tried to reach out again and feel her friends, but the planet itself was a great white roar in the Force and it was hard

to locate individual beings on it, especially when the knights sitting around her bled their so-strong desires. Yet she thought she felt something from the planet, something unique and familiar but not a person. It almost reminded her of the how the world past Rohakalla's gate had felt: alive with raw, untamed energy waiting to be shaped.

And if that was what was waiting for them, Kyra didn't know if she could handle it again.

Old fears were jarred by new ones. The shuttle made a hard maneuver, knocking the back of her skull against the bulkhead. The whole ship shuddered as they took fire on their shields.

From the forward compartment, the pilot called, "Hang on tight! We're taking heavy fire and falling back!"

Kyra growled and squeezed her chest restraints. She dreaded to think of what this delay would cost her and, worst of all, there was nothing she could do about it about she and everyone else aboard were at the mercy of the larger fight.

As Selvaris had reminded her already, there were limits to what the Force could do, and what she could do in turn. Kyra hated it, and she raged in silence as another laser volley rocked the ship.

Even before she stepped onto the mountaintop, Ania knew that everything had changed. It was that same instant, wordless type of knowing she'd felt before and it filled her with a chill even deeper than the wind's.

She was the first one down the assault shuttle's landing ramp and up the remainder of the slope to the summit. At first glance the scene was the same as she'd left it. A cluster of Yuuzhan Vong, warriors and shapers both, formed a loose circle around the light-pillar spearing upward. As the Yuuzhan Vong parted and allowed Ania to pass, her eyes marked the ring of piled stormtrooper's bodies forming a barricade around the eruption. They fell on R2-D2, and then on Sauk. Of her mother, there was no sign.

But that didn't surprise her. Even before Sora Auch's soft aside, Ania had known what her Marin was about to do. She just hadn't admitted it to herself.

Feeling still and empty inside as the knowledge settled in, she kept walking toward the light. Sauk moved toward her, R2-D2

rolling behind. The Mon Cal plaintively said, “Ania, I’m sorry. Your mother—”

“I know what she did.” She put a hand on her friend’s arm.

“I should have stopped her, but...”

“No. It’s okay. Really.”

Ania wasn’t upset, wasn’t sad. It didn’t even feel like her mother was gone. She knew Marin was still here too, the same way she’d known Cade was. She turned to face the light full-on and stared. There was something different about the pillar, available even to the naked eye. It was thick but had narrowed somewhat. There was a new flickering around its edges, as though it was struggling to sustain its own light. For a few tiny moments the whole pillar seemed to shudder; the light darkened and she briefly saw two bodies, both familiar, suspended in the glow.

Behind her, voice rasping, Marasiah said, “Ania... I am so sorry.”

Ania turned. Her cousin had said something like that before, when they’d rescued her from her Coruscant prison but Marin had been captured. She’d even had the same despairing tone.

“She’s in there though,” Ania said, thoughtfully. “You can feel here, can’t you?”

“Can you?”

Ania didn’t know how, but she could. Wonder warded off grief. She asked Khat Lah, “Did something else happen? It looks different and it feels different.”

“I am not certain, but I suspect I know,” said the Yuuzhan Vong. “A volley of laserfire fell toward this location from orbit. Likely, it would have cracked the mountain apart. But the volley disappeared.”

“The planet deflected it,” said Marasiah.

“Or absorbed, or dissipated it.” Khat Lah shrugged broad shoulders. “The effort saved us... but it broke Sekot’s concentration. Its ability to kindle the eruption has been dwindling.”

“Then what happens now?” asked Ania. “Cade and my mom.... What are they *doing* in there?”

“I... do not think I could understand if I tried.”

But Ania felt she could. If she tried. If she surrendered herself to the power she was feeling inside her, the power she

*knew* she had for the first time in her life. Jao had told her that surrender was the key to becoming one with the Force. Ania had always thought that was, in her mother's word, *osik*. Like Cade, she'd felt most alive when struggling.

But Cade was in there, and so was her mother. Surrendering to the Force, yet struggling to mark their will upon it. And through that paradox they might reawaken the Force itself.

Hoarse but firm, a voice said, "I don't suppose she left a payment before she jumped in the fire."

They turned around and saw Sora Auchs, flanked by two armored soldiers, standing in front of the circle of Yuuzhan Vong. Big warriors stood to block her passage but, Sauk called, "It's all right. I have what she wants."

The warriors parted enough for Sora to get through. Sauk took out a datacard and handed it to her. "That's information and access for an account," he said. "She says it has all the money she promised you."

Sora looked at the card with surprise, and the eruption with confusion. But her voice was respectful as she said, "She was a woman of her word, then."

"Always," said Ania.

Their eyes held. Sora's hand folded to a fist around the datacard. She gave Ania a single nod, one that accepted everything, and stepped back through the ring of warriors.

During that exchange, others had stepped forward. Jao and Yalta Val were staring at the light in reverence. Azlyn, Saara, and Monia Gahan lingered back. Marasiah stood apart from them all but just a meter from the white-armor barricade.

Ania went up to her cousin and put a hand on her shoulder. "You're tempted, aren't you?"

"Yes," Marasiah whispered.

"Don't forget you've got Stazi and your uncle up there."

Marasiah said nothing. With that damned wordless knowing, Ania understood that her cousin was more afraid of history's tide than the power pulsing ahead of them.

She looked at the others too. She saw Jao and felt him, in a way she never had before. She understood the aching need for the Force that had dominated him, and she understood why he'd joined her in crisscrossing the galaxy for all those years. Maybe she understood better than he did himself.

Most of all she understood how badly he wanted to step into that light, even knowing it would tear him apart. He needed the Force that desperately.

But that light was province for Skywalkers only. Even the ones who'd never thought of themselves as such.

Understanding was a strange thing. It filled her with empathy and erased all doubts. So much of Ania's life had been spent running from things that had gone before, less her family legacy and more mistakes she'd made herself. But in the Force she found she could accept them all, good and bad, and she wondered what her life would have been like if she'd have known its touch from the start.

She jostled Marasiah's shoulder lightly. "Hey," she said, "Don't think you're getting off the hook so easy."

Her cousin tore her eyes off the light. "What do you mean?" she asked, voice cracking.

"You *know* what I mean." Ania sighed and turned to Jao.

She was the only thing that could turn him from the light, and when she drew near he asked, "Ania, what is it?"

She sighed and put hands on her hips. "You know how I always annoy you by acting impulsively?"

He hesitated, like a man weighing how truthful to be. And to his credit he said, "Yes."

"Well... I'm sorry." Ania slapped palms on his cheeks, popped to her toes, and kissed him on the mouth. They froze like that until she pulled an inch back and breathed, "I'm really, really sorry."

She kissed him once more, too short, then dropped and turned, not daring to see the look in his eyes. But he didn't call for her. Neither did Sauk or Marasiah. They didn't have a chance. Ania took the barricade at a run and vaulted over it. Three more strides carried her into the light.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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Ania was a creature of space and time, and when she'd stepped into the light she'd fully expected to be totally lost within some incomprehensible power.

She was, therefore, very surprised to find herself standing in her old junkyard on Carreras Minor.

Ania recognized the place instantly, though she hadn't been here in years. She knew the maze of piled-high starship parts, dead droids, components so crunched and rusted nobody knew what they were anymore. The place was a garbage heap organized only so far as to help find useful scrap parts. As she wandered, Ania recognized crumpled body of an old binary load-lifter. Turn a corner in the maze and there was the tangled pile of conductor cables. Hang a right and, sure enough, there were three long fusial thrust engines from an ancient Incom X-wing, one piled atop the other; she'd never found out what had happened to the fourth. This was Carreras Minor as she'd known it, without a doubt. Even the sickly yellow-orange tint to the sky was a perfect match.

For a long time she'd thought this was all she'd ever have. When people told her she had good instincts, that she might make something of herself one day, Ania had scoffed. She'd known what she was: a junkyard orphan, forever solo. Given what she'd been through before Carreras she'd counted herself lucky for even that. Then a damaged Imperial communications droid had shown up, and that seemingly-random encounter had kicked off a series of events that led her to Jao and Marasiah, Cade and her mother. And finally, that path had led her to this place that was no place.

Though it seemed to real, even down to the smell of rust and aged lubricants, Ania knew this could not be the real Carreras Minor. She'd heard from cade how this plane was so beyond understanding, their mortal minds had to squeeze it into extant memories to make it halfway comprehensible.

She knew this was all an illusion, but the sound of the first laser-blast whipping over her head still sent her running.

Ania looked over her shoulder as she rounded the closest turn. She saw shadows in the junkyard-maze behind her, but could identify nothing beyond that. Another laser-blast lanced at her but she ducked behind cover. She heard no voices and footsteps, but she knew the shadows were surging after her in pursuit.

This was Ania's maze, and she knew it well. She hung a sharp left at the dead gonk droid, then crawled behind the tilted hull of a gutted landspeeder. She sensed, rather than heard, the shadows move past her. When she peeked out from beneath its edge she saw nothing and stepped back into the open path.

Thinking the best way to elude her pursuers- whoever or whatever they were- was to backtrack, Ania started down the past she'd come. As soon as she turned a corner she found herself looking down a long lane with scrap parts piled high; standing midway down the aisle was a figure in a loose green robe. Though a hood eclipsed her head, Ania could make out the gray face of a young Twi'lek woman.

The Twi'lek tapped a finger on her lips for silence, then beckoned Ania to come.

Something- her gut? the Force?- told Ania she could trust this woman, certainly more than the shadowed figures who'd shot at her. Still she hesitated; this figure was a stranger, and she had no idea where she might be taken.

But then she heard the crackle of laserfire behind her and the only choice was to run. Ania sprinted for the Twi'lek, and when she reached her the Twi'lek grabbed her by the hand and dragged her ahead, taking her down twists and turns while their shadowy attackers continued to fire blasts at their backs.

This place had been Ania's home and she'd thought she knew every corner of it, but somehow the Twi'lek was taking her down unfamiliar, secret lanes. They skirted through narrow passages, around unfamiliar husks of droids and piled speeder

parts, until they were finally far away from their pursuers.

Despite the frantic rush Ania didn't feel tired or out of breath, which she supposed was final proof this place was no place, her body no longer a body. When she looked at the Twi'lek beside her, thought became speech.

Ania asked, *Who are you?*

*I am Tasha Ryo, the Twi'lek said. You can think of me as your guide.*

She knew that name. *My guide to where? What is this place?*

*It's not a place, said Tasha. It's what is. Call it the Cosmic Force.*

*And what do I have to do here?*

*Build a bridge.*

*To where?*

*To everything.*

This was the part where things finally stopped making sense. Ania asked, *Where are Cade and my mother? Can you get me to them?* The ache to see them had never felt so great.

*I'll take you as far as I can, Tasha said, and took Ania's hand once more.*

And Tasha led her deeper into the junkyard maze. Her old home felt alien now; Ania sensed the hostile, unknowable powers chasing her, crowding her close. And in the direction she could only call *forward*, the one in which Tasha led, Ania sensed something else. It was a power, pure and strong and different from everything else here, without even a shade of individual consciousness. It felt to her what the eruption had felt like on the mountain; a blaze of life greater than the world she existed in.

*Are we going there?* Ania asked, afraid for the first time.

*You are, said Tasha, tinged with regret. And there is no going back.*

*I knew that going in.* If she'd paused and thought about it longer, Ania might have been frozen in indecision. But she'd charged in recklessly, because she knew from experience that was the only way to make hard choices. You had to move fast to outrun your doubt. She was still doing it here, in this place that was no place, sprinting with legs that were not legs. That inchoate power lingered ahead of her and she couldn't turn away, though she felt the quake of dread and awe.



Sensing this Tasha said, *Don't fight it, and don't fight yourself. You have to let it become you.*

*I don't know what that means. I've never even touched the Force before now. I don't understand how to use it.*

*Just because you couldn't wield the Force doesn't mean you weren't a part of it.*

And suddenly they turned a corner, and Tasha was gone. The junkyard was gone too, and so were her pursuers. Ania was stranded in pure dark, but not alone. A new mind was with her. This one was strange and unfamiliar, but it had clearly once been a mortal like Cade or Marin. This being was serious and dignified, and like Marasiah bent by too many responsibilities. But there was a core of deep love there too: love for family, and love for an ideal. Finally, there was a grimness. For either love, this being would sacrifice and would kill.

*And in that way, I worked the will of the Force,* he said.

The colorless, spaceless void in which Ania existed disappeared in a flash. She found herself seeing the bridge of a starship. It was classically Imperial, with a forward viewport, consoles on the sides, two sunken pits for the helm and weapons crews and an aisle down the middle, perfect for an admiral to promenade on.

But the admiral here wasn't promenading. He saw staring down at the planet below- Ania vaguely recognized it as Bastion, the old Imperial capital- and at the array of mighty warships spread in front of it. All had turned to face him and Ania could sense this was a standoff that could, and would, soon break into violence.

Which meant this being standing before her, wracked by silent conflict, was Davek Fel, Marasiah's father and effective founder of the Fel Dynasty. Ania was no history expert but she knew he'd gone to war with hardline factions in the Empire, that he'd created the Imperial Knights, that he'd been assassinated during the liberation of Hapes, and that, all his life, he'd never used the Force at all.

*But it used me and I used it,* Davek's voice told her. *The Jedi who became Imperial Knights were my guardians and protectors. They were also my conscience, guiding me to be fair and just in all I did.*

And as the vision progressed, Ania saw Davek give orders to

his bridge crew. They snapped to action. Laser bolts lanced out from his destroyer toward the ones waiting, and a battle lit up between them.

*I plunged the Empire into a war with itself, to save it, Davek insisted. I did it to protect the ideals of my parents, but most of all, I did it to protect my family. I gave the fire order because down on Bastion my mother and my sons were in mortal danger, and I would tear apart the stars to save them.*

*And was what the will of the Force?* asked Ania.

*They were Jedi. My enemies were puppets of the Sith and would have destroyed them. I admired and envied them all my life, and when the time came to take a stand I tipped the history of the galaxy in order to protect them. Even without touching the Force, I preserved it.*

Ania felt humbled by his resolve, and for the first time understood some of the burden Marasiah had to carry. *I appreciate all of that, but I'm no empress. I'm nothing. I ran a junkyard.*

*But you shaped history nonetheless.*

*I wasn't trying to. I was just trying to do the best I could at any time... and outrun the things I regretted.*

*But you turned and faced them in the end. You showed what you really were then.*

This was a new voice, not imperious at all. The mind attached to it felt young but also old, worn by experience it shouldn't have had to endure. There was a bravery in it too, bordering on recklessness, and a painful self-sacrificing nobility.

*So many people show who they really were in their last moments,* the young voice said. *I was no exception.*

The vision of the destroyer's bridge was washed away. The slick decks were replaced by rough earth, the walls by tangles of creeper vines and gnarled branches. The air was brackish, thick with ash and the reek of burning flesh. Bodies clashed around her, moving among the smoky shadows, too fast and vague to be seen clearly. Lightsabers hummed through the air and projectile whistled in deadly arcs. Yuuzhan Vong thud bugs, Ania realized. This was a Yuuzhan Vong world.

*A worldship,* the voice corrected her. *A shaper's laboratory.*

And she saw one figure racing out of the shadows and into clarity, swinging his gold-bladed lightsaber in a desperate,

losing battle. Ania's heart clenched at the sight of him; he was just a *boy*, sixteen or seventeen at most. Blood streamed from cuts across his face and arms and an abdomen wound stained half his shirt ugly red. He was dying, but still fighting.

*My mother named me Anakin, after my grandfather, the young man said. And for a long time I thought that was a burden. But Skywalkers give for Skywalkers. As he gave himself, I gave myself.*

She watched Anakin dance among the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, cutting down one after another even as he took more wounds. A red corona appeared to around him, and she sensed the raw power of the Force was burning him from the inside, but he was pulling on it anyway to keep on his feet and fighting.

*I lost a friend at the start of the Yuuzhan Vong war, Anakin said, voice mournful but calm, so in contrast to the fierce combatant she was watching. I blamed myself for that death for a long, long time. I kept trying to outrun the loss but I faced it in the end. I faced the end with as much bravery as my friend, and I won time for the Jedi to survive the war.*

*And for them to save the Yuuzhan Vong, Ania told him. None of this- where I am now- would be possible without their help.*

*I know, Anakin thought warmly. The Force works in mysterious ways, doesn't it?*

*Are you saying it's working now, in whatever place I'm in?*

*The place we're in, together, corrected Anakin. The Unifying Force is the final will toward life. Its binds everything and touches everything, and whether it has a will like you or I do, I can't say. But it's most basic need is to be, and for so long the Yuuzhan Vong, and even the people of our galaxy, have been blinded to the Force's true power.*

*And that's what we're here to do now? Unleash it? Awaken it?*

*We're here to build a bridge, Cade Skywalker intruded out of nowhere. Weren't you listening? Amazing how the man could still be abrasive even after ascending to a new level of existence. But if he were anything else, he wouldn't be Cade.*

*I'm trying to, Ania rejoined. She looked for Cade, groped feebly for his presence. He was near but she could not see him. This isn't easy for me. The Force was never a part of my life.*

*That's not true*, her mother said with an ache. *It always was*. And another voice said, *Without it, you'd never be here at all*. Ania knew that voice. It was an old man's, firm and purposeful; it was satisfied. It roused images long blurred by memory but they resolved clear in front of her, eclipsing Anakin Solo's last battle. Now she saw a white-bearded old man with a wry smile and generous eyes in the hallway of a ship. It was her parents' ship, *Fast Start*, and it had been Ania's only home for the first seven years of her life.

But no longer. She knew this; old memory had been scalded into her mind. Right now home was ending. Alarms blared. The whole hallway shook. And that old man, who'd moved so slowly before, was careening down the broken freighter's zero-gravity halls, dragging a seven-year-old girl behind him with one hand.

Ania watched herself and she watched the old man, her grandfather. Arlen Fel drew on the Force to swing them into the emergency access corridor. The entire ship began to groan as a seam along its outer hull spread wide, spilling atmosphere into the vacuum. Young Ania cried out as her grandfather flung her toward the escape hatch with the Force, sealed her inside, and jettisoned her pod into space seconds before the hull breach ripped apart this very chamber.

The vision held on Arlen as dead space swept him away, with a contented smile on his face.

*Skywalkers do for Skywalkers*, Ania said grimly. *I get it already*.

*The Force has always been a part of your life*, Arlen soothed her. *And you have always been a part of it*.

*You say that, and I believe you. But what does that mean now? What can I do in this place?*

And when the vision of her grandfather faded away, Ania found herself back in her junkyard. She was no longer inside the maze but above it, standing on a promontory of piled rust overlooking the tangled paths that had been her home. The yellow-tinted sky of Carreras Minor spread overhead; the foul-smelling breeze was cool.

And she was no longer alone. Cade was here and so was her mother. She could see them and she could feel them, standing on this promontory above a landscape of rust. Cade's truculent

stubbornness seemed to join her and become her own. Marin projected a calm acceptance that soothed Ania when facing the incomprehensible.

*I never wanted you to come here, her mother told her. But I think I expected it.*

*I came because I thought you needed help, Ania told her. She touched Marin's arm but it did nothing to make her feel more closely connected; they were already bound tightly by the Force. But I'm still not sure what I can do. I just don't know the Force.*

*Yes, you do. You've always known, Marin said. The truths that exist in the Force are the ones that have always existed in ourselves, if we dare look closely. And that means the things you do- the things that define you- are always with you, waiting to be done. In understanding yourself, you understand the Force.*

*What am I supposed to do?*

*There, Marin said, extending a hand. Ania followed her gestured to another high point of piled garbage on the far side of the junkyard. And atop that homely peak was a point of brilliance. It was light greater than light, and though it was distant Ania found she had to look away, afraid of its intensity.*

*Is that... the Unifying Force?*

*It's where we have to go, and you're part of this bridge too, Cade told her. Think of yourself as a plank laid on top. I'm one of those too and your mom. And your grandpa and great-uncle and whatever, they're the pillars that hold us on top of the water.*

*And the water is what, then?*

*Where we are now, Marin said. On one end of the bridge is the land you left behind. The people you loved- and the ones you didn't. On the other end is the Unifying Force.*

*She risked look back at that terrifying, glorious light. But if they're the pillars and we're the planks, who uses the bridge? Who walks on it? How are we supposed to just let people pass over us?*

*It's just a metaphor, okay? said Cade. Don't beat it to death.*

*Think of it as a bridge, or think of it as a river, said Marin. It's both those things and so much more. The Unifying Force flows directly to the Living; pure, primordial power,*

*uncontrolled by the Whills, even untainted by their schism between light and dark.*

*Pure Force power? Isn't that dangerous?*

*Yes, said Cade. But it's also the Force as it was meant to be. And what they do with it once they get it is up to them.*

*That sounds frightening, Ania admitted.*

*Well, if I could get chewed up by the Force and come out okay in the end, I say there's hope for anybody.*

*I hope you're right.*

*Yeah, Cade admitted, more seriously. Me too. But this is the only way we've got to do it.*

*All right. Ania steeled herself. What happens now?*

*There is no now, here, said Marin. But to the extent that there is... we wait.*

Waiting in a timeless no-place was something Ania would never get her mind around. *Wait for what?*

*What do you think?* said Cade. *Party's not over until all the guests arrive.*

*Oh. Realization hit her; she shouldn't have expected anything else. But she's got much she needs to do.*

*Everyone does. I'd have never strode in here if I hadn't taken five blaster shots to the gut. You and your ma went in willingly. You two are brave cheeka, you know that? Braver than I ever was.*

*Thanks. That means a lot,* Ania said honestly, because she'd never thought of herself as brave at all, just a survivor. *But on the other side, that eruption is dying. Sekot is having trouble keeping it lit. If it fails-*

*Then we end up just shy of a bridge,* Marin said.

Ania couldn't guess what it would be like to exist as the bridge, or the river, or whatever metaphor made sense to her once-mortal mind. What she did know was that, despite all the bravery and sacrifice it had taken to get her here, her ultimate fate was out of her hands.

And so, Ania thought wryly, she was finally learning what Jao had meant when he'd told her about surrender. She just hoped she could do right by time and give him what he needed. She clung to that desire, as strong as any she'd ever had, as she waited for the last guest to come.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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Against the grey stone of the mountaintop and its white dusting of snow, Talon's scarlet-and-black corpse seemed like an intrusion from another world. The jarring sight, seen from a distance, instantly drew Marasiah toward it.

She descended the slope carefully until reaching the cusp of the ledge on which Talon lay. The sight of a lightsaber stab-wound through her unmoving chest instantly proved she was dead, but Marasiah's attention was drawn to her face. Death and cold wind had frozen her with lips lightly parted and slightly curved. Marasiah knew for a fact that she'd never seen Talon smile before. The expression of joy had always seemed alien to her harsh, beautiful face. But she was smiling now, and Marasiah would never forget the sight. Nor would she forget the bright blue of her eyes. In her dark pupils, Marasiah caught a reflection of the light-pillar still flickering on the summit.

She reached with unsteady hand to close them. Her fingers brushed Talon's forehead, eyelids, and cheeks. They were all cold as stone. The rampart of the dead built atop the mountain made more sense now; it had not been Cade's doing alone. She wondered who had killed Talon; Eli Horn was the most likely candidate but his body was not on the peak and when Marasiah spread her awareness with the Force she found no trace of him.

But then, it was hard to be sure. The power of the eruption was so great it threatened to drown out everything else.

Marasiah stayed crouched beside Talon, staring at that face. The eyes were closed but the faint smile remained. Before dying Talon had described herself as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The purpose the Sith bred into her had been

replaced by something nobler. Marasiah imagined that Talon had welcomed new purpose not because it was noble, but because she needed to be filled. Without something greater than herself, she'd been nothing at all.

Eventually Marasiah raised her head and looked directly at the light. It had given Talon something already, and it was offering Marasiah something even greater. She didn't and couldn't know what that was, but she felt Cade, Marin, and even Ania inside it now. She knew it was the place she needed to be.

But though she was no longer empress, Marasiah still had responsibility here. Ania had been right about that. They all had. She was still her father's daughter, raised with the imperative to serve. For three years she'd been paralyzed by doubt and inner darkness, not acting for fear she'd do more harm than good. She was still terrified of it, and in no way confident. Yet staring at Talon she wondered that if even a woman like this might work good in the end, there might be hope for her.

She only rose from Talon's side when she heard the roar of starship thrusters. She searched the sky until she spotted a boxy assault shuttle incoming. The design wasn't Imperial, and that filled her with relief. She began walking up the slope, toward the light and the newcomers.

Rather than try to land on the mountain, the shuttle hovered near the peak and deployed passengers from an extended ramp before veering away. By the time Marasiah reached the summit, the shuttle was just lifting off and its assemblage of armored resistance troopers were warily facing the Yuuzhan Vong warriors.

"It's all right! They're friendly!" called a young woman's voice.

Marasiah spotted the one called Kyra walking quickly from the troops through the ranks of Yuuzhan Vong. The silver lightsaber bobbing at her hip was unmistakable. Behind her were other half-familiar faces: a Togruta Jedi and a Wookiee, plus Ganner Krieg, looking so strange with his hair cut short and square jaw blurred by red beard. As Marasiah approached most of the resistance troopers didn't pay her attention- their eyes were on the Vong and the surreal light-pillar- but



Ganner's locked on hers across the distance.

She gave him the tiniest nod and kept walking.

Kyra was already talking with Jao Assam, looking between him and the light pillar. Marasiah got close enough to hear him say, "I'm sorry, but... They all went inside. Even Ania."

The young woman looked like she was going to cry. Staring at the light Kyra staggered toward it, but Marasiah came alongside her and grabbed her arm. "Don't," she said. "You'd never survive."

Kyra blinked and looked at her. She rasped, "I know."

Of course; she'd seen one of these before. Marasiah let go of her. "Ania made her choice. They all did."

Jao told her, "Sekot is sustaining that eruption, but I don't think it will last much longer. It's a huge strain on the planet."

"Then what else can we do?" Kyra stared at Marasiah.

The former empress took a deep breath. "I can... feel Sekot still working. The eruption will last for a little while yet."

"But you-"

"I know what I have to do. Better than you do."

Kyra looked away, chastened. She stared into the pillar as it began to flicker and dim. Light from the edges seemed to fray and dissolve with the cold wind. For the tiniest moment three bodies looked to be suspending in the pure light, but then they winked out of view.

Marasiah looked out on all the others still assembled. The Yuuzhan Vong and the rebel soldiers, Khat Lah, Senator Gahan, Saarai Derrol, Sauk, Kyra, and four of her old Imperial Knights, all here to witness.

Her eyes locked on Azlyn, who straightened to attention. "What can I do for you, Empress?"

Marasiah didn't bother to correct her this time. "Master Rae, do you have a recording device?"

Azlyn looked uncertainly to Sauk, who volunteered, "I think we still have one on *Free Agent*."

"Then take me to it. Quickly." Marasiah looked back at the weakening light. "Our time is not infinite."

The battle over Zonama Sekot had been joined in full. Regent Chalk's flagship had pulled nearly to the edge of the planet's gravity well and sidled next to another star destroyer. Together

they were too formidable to be taken on, but Admiral Yage's *War Hammer* was currently exchanging broadsides with an old Mon Cal cruiser while two fast mercenary frigates nipped at its aft shields. The other four star destroyers were being harassed as well, and starfighter squadrons snarled into massive dog-fights that lit up the space between capital ships with a riot of small, second-long explosions.

From *Paramount's* bridge, Stazi saw the full panorama. At the start of the fight he'd hoped to catch the *Jagged Fel* before it could rendezvous with Yage's fleet, but the flagship's fighter wing had fought an admirable delaying action and allowed Chalk to escape after taking a few withering blows. After that failure things had started to fray into a free-for-all, and though Stazi did his best to coordinate the rebel fleet with the mercenaries, he knew that every passing second meant the odds of success were lower.

This was not a fight he wanted to restart his career as resistance leader with. Raw numbers were in the Federation's favor, and the joint rebel-mercenary fleet was unwieldy at best. Worse was that, with Chalk out of reach, he didn't even know what his victory conditions were. Supposedly Zonama Sekot needed protecting, though from the one volley Chalk had fired at it, it seemed capable of protecting itself. Supposedly momentous events were happening on its surface but Stazi had no clue what they were and probably couldn't understand if he tried. And even if the planet did decide to lend a metaphorical, Force-imbued hand he wasn't sure if he could trust it. The Jedi were unreliable partners already, and he had a feeling this place would just amplify the problem.

Because he was confused and, frankly, losing the fight, Stazi decided to try something desperate. He ordered the comm lieutenant to patch a direct line to *War Hammer*, with a request to speak to Admiral Yage. Stazi frankly didn't expect much. Yage was honorable enough but he was Imperial to the core, and in their years of cooperation he'd never established a personal repore with the man.

But when the human's blunt face appeared via holo after less than a minute of waiting, Stazi chose to be encouraged. "Admiral Yage," he said, "Thank you for the reply."

"Admiral Stazi." Yage nodded. "I heard you'd escaped."

"I have the bravery of my comrades to thank for that."

"They're showing their bravery now. And their foolishness."

"A fool is a man who follows a leader when he knows that leader is wrong. Admiral, I bear you no ill will. Chalk is the man who staged his niece's assassination and used it as a pretext to purge his enemies. He also organized the attack on Galactic City and slaughtered the entirety of Jhoram Bey's fleet while ignoring its offer of surrender. Chalk deserves your loyalty as much as Krayt did."

Stazi had expected some flustered, angry rebuttal, but instead Yage looked thoughtful. "What are you suggesting, Admiral? That I switch sides and turn rebel?"

"Rebellion is not in your blood. I understand that. I'm asking you to serve the *true* government."

"And that's you, is it?"

"The rightful leaders of the Federation are myself and Marasiah Fel."

"Where is the empress? Can I speak to her?" When Stazi gave no reply, Yage shook his head. He seemed more frustrated than skeptical. "Can you offer me any proof of what you're saying?"

"Marasiah is not on hand. She's down on the planet. Likely she's the reason Chalk fired on Zonama. He *did* tell you what planet we're fighting over, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," Yage said, indignant. "I'm sorry, Admiral, but I'm no rebel."

Yet he kept calling Stazi *admiral*. He hoped that meant something. "You're also an honorable man. You refused to serve one unjust leader. I'm hoping you still have the strength."

"Did you hail just to lecture me on my character?"

"I came to appeal for help. This isn't about you or me, or Zonama Sekot. We can correct the state of the whole galaxy right here, right now."

"You're asking me to start a civil war."

"No, I'm asking you to stop a criminal."

"It's too much. I'm sorry, Admiral, I can't give you what you want. Good day."

But he'd kept saying *admiral*. Stazi tried to cling to that in hope, but it was small solace as the holo winked off and he turned his attention to the still-raging battle. The Mon Cal

cruiser battling *War Hammer* had taken severe blows all along its bow and was trying to pull out, but Federation frigates were giving chase and shredding its unshielded segments. The resistance couldn't afford to lose a ship like that, and Stazi was afraid it might already be gone.

He barked orders for the fighter wings to cover its escape. *War Hammer* held position and so did the other destroyers. There was no need for them to give chase. So long as Yage stayed in the fight and Zonama Sekot did nothing, Chalk had the battle well in hand.

In his head, Stazi began calculating the best methods of withdrawal.

With a tap of the trigger, Gunner released a chain of laserfire that ripped a black-scorched seam in the Mon Cal cruiser's unshielded hull. As she tugged on the control stick and pulled up she saw the breach burst wider, spilling debris and possibly crew into the void. The rebel vessel continued to lurch ahead, but Skull Squadron and a full additional wing of TIEs were breaking it down bit-by-bit.

She'd feel no satisfaction for the kill. This was a fight they shouldn't have even been in. As best she could tell from the cockpit of her fighter, though, they stood to win it. Good news for her pilots, but she didn't know if it was good for the Federation or the galaxy. Things were becoming unclear again, just as they had late in the war between Krayt and Roan Fel. Gunner yearned for clarity.

She called on her wingmates to form up behind her and begin another attack run. As they attempted to rendezvous high above the Mon Cal cruiser's spine, a flight of Crossfires dove in, forcing them to scatter. The rebel fighters didn't stay for a dogfight but instead raced ahead, spewing lasers wildly to clear off more TIEs that swarmed around the dying cruiser like hungry fleshgnats.

"One flight, on my rear again," Gunner called, and held her ship steady so they could join her.

Once they'd done so she lined them up for another attack run but was interrupted by the notification of an incoming hail. She saw it was a broad-freq general announcement and slowed her approach to listen.

“All ships, this is Admiral Yage of the *War Hammer*,” her father said. “All starfighters are to withdraw from combat immediately. I repeat, all starfighters are to return to their base ships. All support craft are to disengage with the enemy and rendezvous at point oh-five-seven. Star destroyers will begin removal to point oh-six-eight.”

“Again, this is a direct order from Admiral Yage. It will not be countermanded. All orders from the *Jagged Fel* are to be disregarded. We are withdrawing immediately. Stand by for further orders after reaching the fallback point. *War Hammer*, out.”

Gunner’s heart surged, by a voice immediately came in over her headset. “Lead, what the blazes is your dad thinking?” That was Jae Akura.

“Orders are orders, Skull Five. We follow them.”

“We have them on the run,” complained Rimmon.

“Let them run, Nine. You heard the admiral.”

“All right, all right,” said Akura. “Just hoping you should shed a little light here.”

Gunner had a damned good idea what her father was doing and wondered what had taken him so long. She twisted her starfighter away from the Mon Cal cruiser and her wingmates, sluggish and reluctant, followed her. As she turned her fighter around and spotted *War Hammer*’s welcoming gray wedge in her viewport she felt elation, but calmed herself.

Her father was abandoning Chalk but he wasn’t joining the rebels. That was fine; she wasn’t crazy about throwing in with terrorists either. But regardless of what happened down on the planet, what her father had done here today would ripple through the Federation and shattering its fragile stability. And even if he tried to stay neutral in this brawl, the breaking to come would demand him to state allegiance.

This wasn’t the end of anything, just the beginning of a new kind of fight.

Sometimes a battle could change so fast it made the dizzying g-forces of a corkscrew spin look mild. The arrival of three new star destroyers had turned the fast attack on Hogrum Chalk’s flagship into a messy slog, and Anj’s initial confidence flying into the battle had quickly dissipated. Like most of

*Paramount's* fighter wing she'd been dragged into a messy brawl with *War Hammer's* TIEs, and she'd ordered the Rogues to clear as many fighters as possible away from the Mon Cal cruiser that was currently limping away from Admiral Yage's destroyer.

As such, she was one of the first to notice when things changed again. The TIE Predators that had been harassing the cruiser suddenly veered away and began running toward *War Hammer*. She checked her scanners and saw many other TIEs were also peeling back and returning to their base ships, while the Federation gunships and corvettes were charging out of the planet's gravity well.

"Boss, what's going on?" asked Rogue Six. "It looks like they're bugging out!"

More professionally, Rogue Five asked, "Do we pursue, Rogue Leader?"

A few other the other fighter squads were giving the TIEs chase, but most were taking formation around the crippled Mon Cal ship. Protecting it had been their priority, so Anj said, "Negative. Just guard the cruiser.

Her pilots sent quick affirmatives as she prepared a transmission to *Paramount*. She didn't expect to talk to Stazi directly but she needed some guidance, or at least explanation as to what was happening.

Unsurprisingly, the carrier was getting inundated with confused calls, and Anj had to wait. She watched her sensors as more TIEs withdrew, and even the big star destroyers started pulling away. She was wondering if something big had happened on the planet below when she noticed the *Jaggel Fel* alone was holding position in orbit.

Then a voice in her headset declared, "Rogue Leader, this is *Paramount*."

It took her a surprised second to realize she was speaking with Stazi himself. "Thanks for taking my call, Admiral. Do we have any idea what's going on?"

"I have a guess. Admiral Yage seems to be withdrawing from the battle."

"But why? Did you say something to him?"

"Yes... Apparently I was more persuasive than I realized."

If Yage was really pulling out that meant Chalk was alone

again, with just a single star destroyer. A formidable destroyer, true, but it was still just one, and it had already taken damage.

Mouth dry, Anj said, "Sir, the *Jagged Fel* is still holding position. What are your orders?"

She waited two heavy heartbeats before Stazi said, "All ships are to attack Chalk's destroyer. I'll give the general order immediately."

"Very good, sir," she said, then signed off.

Her heart was still pounding. Even her hands were trembling. They could end this right here, right now. They could get justice for Jhoram and all the others they'd lost.

When Stazi's general order broadcast a minute later, Anj was already leading the Rogues in an eager charge.

When Marasiah stepped away from the mountain peak, she took all four of her Knights with her back to *Free Agent*, explaining nothing. Yet it was clear she meant to step into the eruption. Saarai had no idea what would happen if she did. The nature of that light was beyond the understanding of a Sith, a Jedi, or even a Skywalker. She only knew that she was terrified of what might happen when Marasiah did.

The Force was a cruel master. Marasiah should have known that better than anyone, but she was readying now to inflict it on the galaxy again. Saarai's remaining hand clenched to a fist and trembled. She tried to think of an escape. There was a rebel soldier standing right beside her with his service pistol in its hip-holster. It would be easy to grab the weapon when Marasiah got returned. Whether she could actually make the shot was unknown; Kyra or the former empress might sense her intentions with the Force. Even if she succeeded in shooting Marasiah- in murdering her- Saarai would likely be killed in turn.

But at least she'd save the galaxy, and herself, from the Force.

The thought tore her apart. To bring the Force back would inflict the black, intoxicating delusion of the dark side on trillions of beings. It was a crime. Saarai could save others from that at the cost of herself, and compared to life enslaved to the Force even death seemed preferable.

All that it would require was murder. That ruthlessness was

Sith, through and through, the kind her father would have approved of but never her husband. Porat was a soldier, and he knew that hard choices had to be made, but he'd never condone shooting an innocent woman in the back.

To save the galaxy from the dark side, Saaraï would have to give in to her own. She discovered she feared that even more than death.

And for that reason she remained frozen in place, hand still bunched to a fist as Marasiah and her Knights returned to the summit. As they neared Kyra cast a backwards glance toward Saaraï, and the Chagrian looked away, heart pounding with fear. But whatever the human had read in her, she did not act. She merely glanced back at the former empress.

When Marasiah reached the peak the great light-pillar shuddered and Saaraï thought she saw the silhouettes of three bodies suspended in the soundless eruption. Three Skywalkers, with one left to join.

The light was like a gateway, and she knew there was no going back once she'd entered. She had no idea what she'd become, what she'd accomplish, or whether she'd wreak more good than harm through her actions. Despite all those things, Marasiah felt compelled to pass through.

Through the light lay purpose. She'd needed that so badly. She was like Talon; she could admit that now. From the beginning she'd been meant to serve a greater cause, but in grief and loss she'd become unable to trust anything, even herself or the Force.

She still didn't know if she trusted them. Maybe the Unifying Force was a cruel master that had commanded Antares to die on Bavinyar to make this moment possible. Maybe that had just been the work of mortals. The Force was impersonal and powerful and because of that she couldn't believe in its good will. Ironical, from a woman who'd once commanded an empire.

She could feel Marin, Cade, and Ania inside the light. For fleeting instants she could ever see them. She felt them beckon to her, not as whirlwinds of incomprehensible power but as the people they'd been. She felt Marin's firm encouragement and Cade's impatience. She could almost hear Ania saying, *Come, it's not so bad.*



Even when she'd lost her husband, her throne, and herself, they hadn't abandoned her. She looked back to see four more who'd stood firm. Azlyn clasped the datarod with her recorded message while Yalta, Jao, and Ganner crowded around her. Even when Marasiah had told them not to, they still put their faith in her. She didn't deserve that trust; it made it all the more imperative not to let them down.

Marasiah had done what she could for the galaxy. She'd left her final statement with Azlyn, and with it the future of the Federation. What they did next was their own choice. She had the faint, hopeful feeling that they'd do better than she had.

She turned to the eruption but her thoughts were on people: those behind her, those ahead, those already gone in the Force. Perhaps she'd see some soon. It was a final hope to cling to.

Trusting people instead of power, Marasiah pulled herself over the barricade and joined her family.

## Chapter Forty

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Inside the light there was power so bright and roaring Marasiah felt overwhelmed, pressed on all sides by beings ancient and incomprehensible, but she also found herself protected from them. She was in a place with no direction, no sound, no light, no motion. But for the intensity of the Force it would have seemed a place with no life. Everything was alien and she felt suffocated by it.

And then chaos gained form. The empyrean reality settled into something she could halfway understand. The scene in which she found herself was familiar and also heartbreaking. The Galactic Federation senate hall on Coruscant was the grandest legislative chamber the galaxy had ever seen, and she'd personally supervised much of its construction. The grandiose building hosted a tiered bowl with thousands of seats beneath its kilometer-wide dome, and a great speaker's podium rose three hundred meters high from the very center. She could still remember standing atop that mighty peak, looking out on the assembled senators in her empress' robes, while at her flanks stood her loyal and loyal protectors: Treis Sinde and Antares Draco, each fearless and devout with his own flavor of love.

Marasiah now had a bottom-level view. She found herself standing at the low slope of the great bowl, looking up at the towering pillar and the cupped underside of the platform from which she'd once spoken. Tiers of seats rose high above her, and though she could see no senators in those seats she felt countless minds peering down at her. They were like formless shadows in those seats but in her mind they weighed hard; she

felt the greedy envy of darkness and the benign control of light, and it seemed like all were trying to quash her tiny self.

They pressed on her, but Marasiah remained. She stood in the middle of a velvet-blue aisle leading between the lowest-level sweats, toward the open-car elevator that rode up the side of the speaker's pillar. And looking down that straight line she saw a single figure, concrete and comprehensible. Most of her body was shrouded in green robes but her grey-skinned face and twin lekku peeked out from beneath the hood.

Their gazes locked across the distance and a mind brushed Marasiah's. It was presence she didn't recognize but it was startling for its empathy and, she thought, its *mortality*. It carried echoes of exultation and fear and all the small worries that dominated every life, and it shared those things with Marasiah as a way of encouragement.

With a voice that was no voice, the presence told her, *I am Tasha Ryo*.

*I know of you*, Marasiah replied. She'd sent thoughts and feelings in the Force before but it had never seen so effortless. Maybe that was because here- wherever here was- thought and feeling was all.

*You're part of the Cosmic Force now, Tasha told her, But you're still anchored in the Living. A part of you always will be. That's what it means to be a Skywalker.*

*Where are the others?*

*Here. They are all here.* And Tasha raised a hand, gesturing to the speaker's platform high above.

Marasiah felt more minds brush hers. Marin seemed relieved, Cade determined, Ania eager. To all of them she said, *I don't know what you want me to do.*

Cade told her: *Build a bridge. Dig a river. Open a big gate wide. It doesn't matter how you think of it. It's all about reaching beyond.*

*To the Unifying Force.*

*That's right.*

*I can't sense it.*

*You will*, said Tasha. *Let me guide you.*

Marasiah walked down the aisle, all the way to the base of the great pillar. The Whills around her continued to press close but could not hold her down as she approached the elevator

platform that would carry her to the top. Marasiah sensed they were being buttressed away by other minds.

*What is protecting me?* she asked.

*Who*, corrected Tasha. *And who do you think?*

As the elevator surged beneath her, pushing her to the pillar's peak, Marasiah felt a new mind, one she hadn't been expecting. It was hard and commanding but also brittle, and though it overflowed with love there was a hate and its core, one she hadn't noticed until it was too late.

*Father*, she said, *You're here too.*

*We are all here*, said Roan Fel. *Even me.*

*When you died there was such anger in you. I didn't know if you'd even pass into the Force, or if you'd be trapped in the dark forever.* She admitted, *I didn't want to consider it.*

*I died with darkness in my heart, but you've done everything to avoid it. I'm proud of you for that, Sia.*

*I've known darkness. It's been with me for years, trying to break in and take me. It's come close so many times. It's seemed so easy to give in to.*

*But you've withstood it. That's more than I ever did.*

*I didn't know it could be so strong, Father. I didn't know I could be so weak.*

*You are still strong. Stronger than I.*

*It's been with me for so many years, even when I didn't realize it. Since mother died.*

*I've stared into the dark just as long. See this.*

And even as the elevator pushed her upward, the sprawling senate hall dissolved in a wash of black. Light and dark and shades of color returned bit by bit, shifting through strange geometries until they became a comprehensible vision. Marasiah saw a hangar bay strewn with debris and ash, but the battle inside it was over. Sitting among the wreckage were a handful of humans. They were mere youths, none out of their teens; they were exhausted and shocked by the battle they'd been through and none looked more stricken than the one with short black hair, who stared into the blank space ahead with something like dread.

*That's you, father.*

*That is me*, he confirmed grimly. *This is the moment that defined me.*

Marasiah noticed others gathered around Roan. The tall boy with tan skin and Imperial Knight armor was Treis Sinde; she couldn't recognize his beardless, smooth face but the quiet compassion in eyes were unmistakable. The one with no armor and long sand-colored hair to his shoulders reminded her uncannily of Nat Skywalker. And, sitting right beside her father, hand nearly touching his, looking so painfully young, was her mother.

*This is when I became emperor, Roan told her. This is the day my father and brother died.*

Marasiah sensed the shocked, swirling emotions of her father as he'd been. Just seventeen years old, an Imperial prince who'd never expected to be more, had suddenly had destiny thrust upon him. The dual losses of father and brother staggered him; the sudden power that laid on him beggared understanding. Elliah edged closer, offering what comfort she could, but she'd never be able to heal the wound the Sith had left in him today. In time, she'd become a wound herself.

*I never escaped this moment, her father said. In the end I let it consume me. But you were stronger than that.*

She didn't feel strong. She hadn't since Antares died. *Will you help us with what's to come?*

*I'm helping you now.*

*I don't know if I can do it.*

*If you've come so far, Sia, you can go the rest of the way. What you have to do now is something else I could never accomplish. You have to surrender.*

Marasiah felt another mind brush hers and add, *Sometimes surrender is the key to everything.*

The new mind was faintly familiar; she remembered it from childhood and it almost reminded her of her grandmother for the authority and earned wisdom it carried. But this was not her namesake, a fact made plain when the vision of the broken hangar disappeared and was replaced by that of an audience chamber, elegant and grand though not nearly the scale of the one she'd left behind. Fluted pillars hoisted a stained-glass ceiling and marble friezes walled in hundreds of finely-dressed attendees. There was an emerald throne and a woman standing beside it, tall and with braided red hair, but the focus on Marasiah's vision drew away from that dais, toward an older

woman standing on the side, dressed not in regal finery but modest Jedi robes. She had a relieved smile on her face and she applauded for the one standing by the throne.

*Almost all of my adult life was spent fighting to reclaim Hapes from the Sith, said the voice of Allana Solo Djo. And when the battle was finally won, I gave it up.*

Marasiah knew that part of family history. Allana had been dispossessed of her throne when barely older than Marasiah was now (had been, outside the light) and had lived in exile for almost forty years. She'd only returned to Hapes at the same time as Roan's ascension to emperor.

*You finally got back the crown that was yours by birthright... And then you handed it off to an elected president.*

*She was also a protégé and a friend, Allana added.*

*You trusted people more than power.*

*Always.*

Marasiah felt another ache for her father's memory. Allana's situation had been much like Roan's. The Sith had dispossessed her and she'd spent years in exile. Yet unlike Roan, Allana hadn't let hate consume her, nor the desire for power. She'd been moved by the desire to do right.

*But how did you know?* asked Marasiah. *How could you tell what was right?*

*I always tried to trust the Force.*

*But it's so hard to trust.*

*I know. I spent all my life afraid of the power inside of me, and for the same reasons as you.*

Darth Caedus. Marasiah didn't even try to say it; the thought appeared between them like a black stain. His fall was far greater and more vicious than Roan Fel's.

*I knew what my father became, Allana said, and I was determined not to follow his path.*

*You did. You liberated Hapes, became a Jedi Master, and led the Galactic Alliance through decades of peace and prosperity. I've done none of those things. I've been a failure.*

*No. You'd only be a failure if you became what you feared.*

Marasiah had become something nearly as bad. She'd become what she'd disdained: a weak, helpless woman who could do nothing for the greater galaxy.

*That's not true, Allana admonished. You're doing it even*

*now. You've already taken the first step of surrender.*

*It's not hard to surrender something you don't want.*

*But you do want your throne. Otherwise it wouldn't hurt you so much to lose it. Yet you never took it back, even when you might have, because you didn't think you could use it responsibly. That's greater wisdom than your father ever showed, or mine.*

Marasiah knew Allana meant what she said. She dared hope it was right. *What happens once I surrender?*

*Then the bridge is complete.*

*But how? I don't feel the Unifying Force. I sense only a vague direction...*

*You will feel it,* Allana promised, her tone sober. *The last of us can show you the way.*

And suddenly that vision of Allana surrendering her throne was gone. Marasiah saw now the bridge of a starship, but the walls were rough and stonelike instead of metal and the controls were clearly Yuuzhan Vong.

She saw no people on this bridge but she sensed them through the Force. One was a flurry of motion, a whirling of angry slashes and bites and stabbing claws. The other was a luminous being, lifted off the deck, glowing so bright it erased all features from the human face. Its arms were spread wide as though to embrace its attacker, and with it the entire universe.

And as it embraced the universe, the universe embraced it back. Power flowed through it like a rushing torrent, and the waters were purer than anything Marasiah had ever known. It was a river that embraced all opposites and spanned the entire spectrum of life energy, beyond light and dark, good and evil. It was the truest Force, unified and unifying.

And Marasiah had heard of this moment, too, though she'd never imagined she might feel it herself.

*You are Darth Caedus,* she said.

*No,* replied the luminous being. *I am Jacen Solo.*

*You found a way past the divide between light and dark to touch the Unifying Force. You used it to destroy the Yuuzhan Vong's Supreme Overlord.*

*No. He destroyed himself. The Force was his instrument, and I was the Force's.*

*But you tapped the Force as its most primal level.*

*I surrendered ego and pride and the will to power. I'd never reach this moment of perfect bliss again and in time longing turned my desires bitter and dark. For good and for evil, this moment defined me.*

*Can you show us this part of the Force too? Can you connect us and complete the bridge?*

*She sensed faint amusement from Jacen. Of course. I was only waiting for you to ask.*

And the faint intimation she'd felt from the Unifying Force became a flood. With his past experience, Jacen could open wide the gates and allow the Force in its purest form to rush into them. The knowledge and power were overwhelming and Marasiah felt everything she was would be swept away in it.

Suddenly the Yuuzhan Vong ship was gone and Marasiah stoop atop the speaker's platform of the senator hall. Tiered seats full of her audience, the Whills, filled the arena beneath her but she stood above them all, hoisted by the collected will of the Skywalkers past. And above her, at the exact peak of the senate chamber dome, was a brilliant light unlike anything she'd ever known; anything she'd ever seen before that flash of Jacen Solo's enlightenment.

*Don't resist,* Cade's voice whispered, uncharacteristically gentle, and she realized he stood beside her on the raised platform. *Let it take you.*

*I never thought you would advise surrender,* she told him.

*Life is full of surprises.*

*Is this life?* she asked seriously.

*Yes,* Cade said. *This is nothing else.*

She looked around and saw Marin and Ania standing beside her as well; like them, she lifted her head to stare into the brilliance above. It seemed like it was growing brighter to swallow them, or they were being pushed upward into it. Marasiah knew she could never stand against such all-consuming power and she felt a trill of fear.

But that lasted only a second; she relinquished it and allowed the flow to take her. To her surprise she did not lose herself. Rather she felt herself gaining, becoming larger and more embracing. The barriers between her mind and the other Skywalkers' began to dissolve but there was no pain or fear for the loss of separation. Instead Marasiah was marveled at the



unity which bound them.

She felt Ania's wonder in harmony with her own. She shared Marin's peaceful acceptance and also Cade's fiercely independent need to do what he willed.

And she felt other minds with her too, and she shared in them. She felt the anger inside her father's heart, the noble will that drove Allana through her losses, and Jacen's craving for ascendancy. She knew all those feelings because they were her own, as every part of her was part of everyone else. They were one Skywalker spanning forever, the last, first, and only Skywalker, and they bridged the Unifying Force across the Cosmic and anchored it in the wound the Sith had carved two hundred years ago. They released into that gap a power beyond light or dark, a power ready to surge through and flood a Living Force made weak and fallow.

The bridge was so close to complete, but one more door had to be opened. It seemed like the simplest one to push aside but for a seeming-forever the great river of collected minds smashed against the gate back to the Living Force, unable to open it.

And from the river emerged a separate flow. The singular mind belonged to the first, last, and only Skywalker, but those left behind in the river knew him as they knew themselves. Anakin was them and they were him because his story was all their stories. His heavy destiny, fear of his own strength, need to use his power wisely, aching loves that could never be fulfilled: all of them wrapped around a black heart of rage at the cruelties of fate. Those were Anakin's and those were everyone's, and everything that was in them had been in Anakin long before.

The first, last, and only Skywalker stood in the carved-out wound he'd been birthed to fill. He could feel the clamor of the Whills both light and dark, pleading with their creation not to loose untold power on the galaxy, because power was danger and danger was chaos, and they hadn't created the Chosen One to unleash strife in the galaxy.

*I know you made me to create balance, Anakin told them, gently, without hate or judgment. The Unifying Force is balance.*

And the collective mind of the Whills screamed at him. *The*

*mortals beneath you will break under such power. They will corrupt it with their own darkness. You know this, Chosen One. You've were broken yourself. Would you condemn infinite lives to the suffering you experienced?*

But Anakin stood firm. *Some will suffer. Many more will flourish. And even those who fall to darkness may find their way back to light.*

*You give them destruction and strife!*

The voice of Anakin and every Skywalker said: *No. We give them life.*

And with a final push the only Skywalker knocked down the door. That vital, overwhelming energy rushed into the Living Force from its fountainhead to spread wide across the stars. Every Skywalker joined the flow and became the flow. They touched the threads that bound each life, then spun them into a single weave until they'd knit the raveled fate of worlds.

It was a moment unseen in all of time and space, and for those at the heart of it, it passed without knowing. The bright eruption springing from Zonama Sekot's mountaintop shuddered and disappeared, leaving only the bald stone summit and its disparate crowd. Whisps of light rose to the air like smoke from a snuffed-out candle and dispersed on freezing wind, like they'd never been there at all.

## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

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Static broke vision, metal joints groaned. Artificial circuits snapped and sparked as a blade of pure light cleaved them apart. The body that was not a body crashed to the durasteel catwalk and Darth Vader sprawled on his back, lost in real pain. An electric snow-burst crackled across his goggles and when it resolved the automatic focus locked onto the stump of his right hand. It showed in detail the sheared-off metal pikes that stood in for bone and the cabled circuits that passed for muscle. He tilted his head, just a bit, and the machines that were his eyes locked onto a new object a meter beyond.

It was his son, standing above him with green lightsaber lifted high to strike. All it would take was one more blow; his pain would end, and Luke's would only begin.

His goggles static-blurred again, erasing his son, but Vader could feel him in the Force. There was righteous anger but also hesitation; the sight of his father's artificial hand had set off a war of emotions within the boy. His desire for victory battled the Jedi training Yoda and Obi-Wan had given him. Vader thought with faint admiration that Luke had mastered himself better than Anakin ever had.

The audioreceptors of his helmet were still working, and over his labored breathing Vader heard his master saying, "Good, good... Kill him and your journey to the dark side will be complete!"

Just hearing it transported Vader back decades. Another throneroom, another starship over another world. Another old man with hand sheared off by lightsaber, another young one with weapon held for the killing blow. And once again, Darth

Sidious waiting for the boy to take a helpless life and initiate his irrevocable fall into the dark.

But Luke was stronger than Anakin had been. He looked at his right hand and flexed it slowly, as though listening to the whirr of motors that stood in for joints. He turned from his father and faced the cowed, withered Sith standing on the stairs behind him.

"You've failed," Luke said, and tossed away his weapon. "I am a Jedi, like my father before me."

The furrows on Sidious' face deepened. Vader could feel the hateful power building inside the old man and he tried to warn his son, but the respirator refused to draw air.

"So be it... Jedi," sneered Sidious. "If you do not turn... you will be destroyed."

Luke was defenseless when cackling energy erupted from his fingers. Even if he'd had a lightsaber to defend the boy would have stood no chance. Blue lighting, pure hate made manifest, racked Luke's body. He fell to deck, smoke pouring from his black clothes as they burned around him.

Sidious stopped long enough to savor Luke's pain. He kept his hands raised, poised to deliver more agony. "Yes..." he hummed, "Only now, at the end, do you understand."

Sidious attacked again, yellow teeth bared in glee. Vader found strength to stagger to his feet. He towered over the old man but felt so small beside him. Sidious had built Vader- physically, morally, mentally- since Anakin Skywalker was nine years old. No, since his very conception. They'd said the Force itself had birthed the Chosen One to bring balance and heal the wound wrought by the Sith, but Sidious- this vicious, wizened monster- had turned even the Force's counterstrike into a tool of darkness. For the first spark of life to this very moment, the Chosen One had been a pawn of the Sith.

This, Vader thought sickeningly, was his destiny. To stand by and watch Darth Sidious murder his son. Because the darkness had always been his master. It had filled him with fear, then anger, then hate, and finally with suffering. The Chosen One had chosen nothing. He'd been a pawn all along.

Sidious halted his lightning-blasts. Luke continued to twist in pain as residual sparks racked his body. He tried to crawl toward the edge of the platform, as though to throw himself

down the bottomless pit below. It would be his only escape from agony; Vader knew Sidious would draw this out as long as he could.

“Your feeble skills are no match for the power of the dark side,” the Sith said with relish. “You will pay the price for your lack of vision.”

More lightning. More crackling agony. As he thrashed on the catwalk, Luke managed to cry out, “Father... please... help...”

The appeal gave Sidious sadistic joy, and he shot more blasts of energy across the boy’s body. Vader looked back and forth between them: the son he’d made and the monster who’d made him. He’d been wrong to think he’d chosen nothing. Luke and Leia were choices he’d made when he’d decided to love Padmé freely.

They were the only things in his life he was not ashamed of, and he was watching Sidious kill them now.

The Sith paused his attacks one more time to savor Luke’s pain. With a fond, almost loving smile he said, “And now, young Skywalker... you will die.”

Energy exploded once more. Luke thrashed and screamed; words were beyond him. Vader couldn’t stand it. He lunged for Sidious and grabbed the old man. He was so small, so light. The energy he’d summoned went wild, crackling across Vader’s body, overloading and bursting the circuits of his respirator, his helmet, even his limbs. With the Force alone to propel him, Vader staggered to the railing and hurled Sidious over the edge.

He didn’t see the old Sith tumble down the pit. His goggles had burst to static-white and then gone black, their vital circuits blown out. Totally blind, Vader collapsed against the railing. His good hand found the bar and held him half-upright. Far below, he felt a final shriek of agony in the Force. Sidious’ dying energy rushed up the shaft as one final wave of crackling hate, and then it was gone.

Vader could barely breathe; his chest heaved to suck air from the wreckage of his respirator. His limbs refused to move. He was dying and would be gone in moments. Through the Force he felt Luke, still luminous and alive, struggling through his residual pain to stand upright.

He felt nothing but satisfaction. All his life they'd told him he was special, a Chosen One born by the Force itself. The burden of destiny had crushed him. Now, he wondered if he'd fulfilled that destiny after all. If so he'd done it not out of love for the Force, but for his son.

Consciousness faded in an out. Within the blind mask of his helmet Vader had only the Force and scattered noises to know he was alive; by some lucky break, his audio receptors still functioned. Through the thickness of his suit he didn't feel Luke drag his body through the halls, but he heard the blare of alarms and the pounding of frantic feet. Maybe the impossible had happened and the rebels had infiltrated the Death Star. Maybe they'd even destroy it. He hoped so. He wanted them to burn every scrap of Sidious and his empire to dust.

At some point Luke stopped dragging him. He could feel his son's desperate love. Even now, Luke thought he could save him. If he lingered much longer he'd doom himself as well.

Though it was so hard to breathe, he moaned, "Luke... Help me take... this mask off."

"But you'll die," his son said.

"Nothing... can stop that now. Just for once, let me look on you... with my own eyes."

Hands jostled his helmet. Switches clicked and pieces separated. The darkness of his dead mask fell away and artificial light blinded him anew. Artificial air cooled the scars on his face; it felt like a lakeside breeze on Naboo. He narrowed his eyes until he could see Luke, dark and blurred, leaning toward him and staring into his father's face for the first and only time. Despite the weakness of his vision, Anakin could feel his son perfectly in the Force.

He drew in air through his own nose and mouth; it seemed to scrape inside his head. "Now... Go, my son. Leave me."

"No," Luke insisted. "You're coming with me. I won't leave you here. I've got to save you."

"You already have... You were right..." Luke darkened, though he opened his eyes wider. His body that was no body felt light. He seemed to be rising free of his armor but he managed to say, "You were right about me. Tell your sister, you were right..."

"Father... I won't leave you," Luke pleaded.

But Anakin Skywalker was already gone. He'd risen free of the black metal casket in which he'd been imprisoned and felt himself within the embrace of the Force. With sweet relief, he readied himself for oblivion. His goals were accomplished, his destiny fulfilled, though in a way no Jedi or Sith had ever imagined.

Finally he could rest.

*Not rest forever, Young Skywalker, a voice admonished, gently. Not yet finished, your destiny is.*

Anakin felt familiar souls draw around him. There was Yoda, old and wise, and Obi-Wan, his brother. And there was a presence he'd ached for in his most desperate hours: Qui-Gon Jinn. He tried to shrink from them in shame, but in this place that was no place there was nowhere to hide.

*It's all right, soothed Obi-Wan. We're here to help you.*

*I don't understand... What is here?*

*Where all life goes once, from the Living Force, they pass,* said Yoda.

*You taught me we dissolve into the Force, like rain in an ocean, never to be ourselves again.*

*Wrong I was, Yoda admitted humbly, about a great many things. Including you, Young Skywalker.*

He didn't feel young. He'd been broken and remade into something horrible, then shed that body too, and now he existed free from flesh, in a place that was not one, to be welcomed by people he'd betrayed.

*Did I fulfill my destiny?* He asked them. *Was I your Chosen One, in the end?*

*You delivered what the prophecy foretold,* said Qui-Gon. *But not as the Jedi imagined.*

*But there will be a new Jedi now,* said Obi-Wan. *A Skywalker will build them, and keep balance in the Force.*

*Is Luke also part of that destiny, and Leia?* His heart ached to think his children would carry the same burdens he had, and suffer for them,

*Yes, Qui-Gon said. I believe it is the fate of every Skywalker, though each will meet destiny in his or her own way.*

*Does mean they'll all carry that weight, through generation after generation, with no end?*

*No, said Yoda. End, everything does, except the Force. Even*

*stars burn out, and even Skywalkers will one day cease.*

*This, Anakin observed, is no end.*

*Mmmm, quite right you are, but of the Force, you are now. Wait, we will, in the place beyond life, to see what becomes of them.*

*I want to help them.* It was the final desire of Anakin Skywalker's life; it would stay with him forever.

*And so will you, said Qui-Gon. And in time, you will be with them when their story ends.*

*But is there time... here?*

He felt Obi-Wan's gentle smile. *In here, there is time for everything. You'll discover there is more to the Force than you, or we, ever imagined.*

Once that promise would have filled Anakin with a lust for mastery. Now, with peace inside, he said, *I would like to learn.*

*Then learn we will, together, said Yoda.*

*The Force is full of wonders, Qui-Gon said. And it is your destiny- the Skywalker destiny- to unlock ones we have never known.*



PART V



THE FORCE AWAKENED



## Chapter Forty-One

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Though he was hidden within a cave halfway down the mountain slope, itself shielded from view by a crowd of trees, Eli Horn knew the instant when the Force changed.

He was already deep within it, drawing on it to survive. The irony did not escape him, and he summoned its power with an intense inner loathing. That he'd survived his fall after Talon had knocked him over the ledge was pure luck; he'd woken up an untold time later with a still-throbbing headache, a cliff-bottom view of a hundred-meter, near-vertical slope, and a staggering pain from his shattered left arm.

But the pain was what he'd needed to keep conscious. The concussion threatened to draw him back to darkness and once he did the cold of the mountainside would snuff out his inner warmth and then his life. Thinking to grab his fallen lightsaber with his good hand, Eli had lurched downslope, seeking shelter. Sometimes he'd slipped and tumbled down scree, and once had even landed on his left arm and nearly passed out from the pain. But in the end he'd found the cave, crawled deep into it, and huddled at its back. Only then had he started to draw on the Force.

He still remembered part of his Jedi training. He knew how to sustain inner warmth with the Force and keep from freezing. He also knew, more vaguely, how to heal. And so he'd dropped himself into a trance and begun mending the broken bones of his upper arm. In the trance there was no time and he had no idea how long it took him to bind them back together, but as he worked the pain started to dull. Reluctantly, he admitted the Force had uses after all.

And that was when he felt the change. The power he was drawing on and deep inside seemed to quake all around him. It surged in intensity and he felt, with mortal dread, that he was going to be subsumed in it. The Force receded after that to the strength it had had before, but something had been changed irrevocably. It was like the view he was used to seeing had resolved into greater clarity.

The Force was more vivid and vital. It terrified him. Wrenching himself from the healing trance, Eli found himself able to stand. The pain in his left arm was still there and he dared not move it. Instead, holding it crook-elbowed and against his chest with his right one, Eli staggered out of the cave and into the forest beyond.

From this spot there was no clear sight of the mountaintop. Eli began awkwardly climbing where he could, using only his legs. He finally reached a patch clear of trees where he could stare up toward the mountaintop. The sky was darkening but he saw no sign of the light-pillar. He hadn't expected to see one. He already knew he'd failed his mission.

Eli shivered in the gathering night. He was alone and afraid, trapped on a world with untold powers. Worse, everything had done had come to nothing. The Force he'd devoted himself to stopping had reawakened with more strength than ever and he was helpless against its vengeance.

Dimly, Eli wondered why it had allowed him to heal his arm at all. Clutching the wounded limb against his chest, he staggered downslope and back into the forest. He didn't feel safe drawing on the Force to stay warm, but lighting a fire would be a signal to anyone searching for him. Even if he wanted to surrender himself, which he didn't, he was countless kilometers from civilization. He was stranded, injured, helpless and alone.

"There's no clear path for you, is there?"

Eli had just stepped past the treeline when that question came at him. He froze and wondered if he'd finally gone made, but the voice had sounded so vivid and curious, and so young. Eli turned to see a single human boy standing on the bare slope behind him. The boy was dressed in a pale wove tunic, like a Jedi apprentice's, and had his sandy hair cut short except for one little braid.

"You're not real," Eli said, and wondered how he could be hallucinating a child he'd never seen before.

"Reality is a pretty slippery concept," the boy said with a grin. "Especially now."

"What happened to the Force? Is it—" Eli stopped himself. Begging his own delusion for answers was insanity.

"I'm still figuring that out myself," said the boy, still smiling. "It feels deeper, doesn't it, and wider. It feels like it could swallow me whole, but also like I could wrap my arms around it."

The boy stretched his short limbs wide, like he was embracing the dusky sky. Eli wondered just how mad he'd become. The child turned his eyes back down and told him, "There's something else I like about this new Force... I mean, the Force was always like this, but it feels moreso now. Do you understand?"

Eli wagged his head back and forth.

"When the Force is new it means *you* are new," the boy said seriously. "It doesn't matter what mistakes you've made. You can choose to start again."

Eli wanted to say he'd made no mistakes, but that wasn't true. It seemed to him then that he'd made nothing but mistakes his whole adult life.

"What happens next is up to you," said the boy. "I can call people in to pick you up, if that's what you want."

*People* meant Jedi or Yuuzhan Vong. He wagged his head again.

"Suit yourself," the boy shrugged. "I was only trying to help."

"I don't want help," Eli spat.

"That's been part of your problem, hasn't it?"

"What *are* you?" He was starting to think this wasn't a hallucination after all.

"I think you know. I would have tried to talk to you sooner, but I was a little busy." The boy looked up at the mountaintop, and melancholy crept into his voice. "But that's all done now."

Eli followed his gaze to the dark sky. When he looked back down the boy was gone. He shuddered and, under compulsion, moved downslope from the clearing. He hurried through the woods and past the cave where he'd hidden, seeking someplace further down and warmer in the night, someplace new. Eli

knew he'd find no refuge, but he kept going anyway. It was all he could do.

The *Jagged Fel* was like an arrowhead shooting away from Zonama Sekot, trailing shield-scatter and hull-breach flame as it raced desperately for an exit vector. A rebel frigate hung off either flank, pounding the larger ship with missile barrages, while the mercenaries' carrier was moving in ahead to cut off the escape.

Staring at the tactical display as the bridge buckled beneath his feet, Hogrum calculated they could push past it and make the jump to hyperspace before the larger rebel ships intercepted them. Barely.

The battle had turned with shocking suddenness. Rulf Yage had withdrawn his fleet without a warning. The *Jagged Fel* had been trying continuously to hail *War Hammer* and received only shocking silence. The man who'd betrayed one master had betrayed another and Hogrum swore he'd make Yage pay. He cursed himself for not finding a way to bring Edouard Fenel with him to Bavinyar instead of Yage. That was a man who wouldn't have failed him.

As the *Jagged Fel* pulled ahead, the mercenary carrier tried to cut in from the side. It added its firepower to the frigate's barrages on their starboard flank but did not try to get in the way of the bigger star destroyer. A rebel ship might have charged ahead, sacrificing itself to trap Hogrum inside Zonama's gravity well, but the hired guns were not so reckless. Hogrum was thankful from small graces. Though the destroyer shuddered from impact on its shields and lucky shots that tore unprotected hull, the *Jagged Fel* continued to soar away.

When the viewport showed only stars, Captain Worgaan asked, "Helm, can we get a hyperspace vector?"

"Plotting now," said the reply from the crew pit.

Hogrum stalked over to the sensor station and asked the lieutenant, "Can we get a view of the target on the surface?"

The officer took a moment to check his board. In the rush to escape, the engagement on the mountain and the troops they'd left there had been forgotten by everyone except Hogrum. The lieutenant peered at his screen and said, "We can't acquire visual on the target, sir."

Hogrum's hands clenched. "Are we too far away?"

"No, sir. The target zone's fallen into twilight, but we still can't find any trace of, um, whatever that was, sir."

"Are you checking visual?"

"Yes, sir. I see nothing."

Hogrum pounded a fist against the lieutenant's seat-back, making him jump, and stalked away from the station. He had no idea what had happened on Zonama and whether the Skywalkers had succeeded in their objective, but with everything else happening he assumed the worst. If the Force *was* coming back he'd have to act quickly. The Imperial Knights would have to be corralled, possibly executed. The Jedi scattered across the galaxy must be hunted. He found himself wishing for Eli Horn; despite the boy's repeated failures he was the only weapon Hogrum had in a war with the Force.

"Captain," said a voice from the helm station, "We have an exit vector plotted. Hyperdrives warmed."

Worgaan looked across the deck to Hogrum. In the loudest, steadiest voice he could manage, the regent declared, "Jump now."

The *Jagged Fel* jumped. The starfield beyond became a hyperspace blaze and relief visibly washed over the bridge crew. Hogrum went over to Worgaan and said, "Once we get clear of this sector, you're to take us back to Coruscant. Understood?"

"Of course, sir."

"And I'll need to use your salon for more secure communications."

"Use it as long as you need, sir."

At least some of his officers knew their places. Hogrum stepped back and looked across the bridge. Many of the crew were busy running post-battle checks, but some were watching him, and they immediately turned eyes away before meeting his. They were relieved to have escaped but confused and scared of what might come next. When they looked at their regent they saw not a proud, comforting figure, but a piece of the mess they were stuck in.

Hogrum told himself that was his own shame speaking. He adjusted his black cape and gathered his dignity, then started

for the rear exit. He stopped after just a few steps. Most of the crew looked away from him instantly, but Astraal Vao, tucked forgotten in her corner station, did not. Hogrum turned to face her full-on and she finally shifted to her console, but for a second their eyes had locked.

And in that second, Hogrum understood. Knowledge was undeniable and it filled him with horror and rage. He strode across the deck to her station, and she turned at the clap of boots. Staring up at him her eyes filled with fear, proving his intuition right.

He loomed close, shadow falling over her. "What did you do, Astraal? What did you tell Yage?"

The Twi'lek trembled. "I... I didn't do anything, sir. I swear it."

"Tell me!" he roared and lashed out to grab her throat.

The entire bridge was staring now. Hogrum barely noticed as his vise-grip locked around her neck. White-hot rage welled inside him as he felt Astraal's trachea squirm beneath his palm. Gasping for breath, she grabbed his arm with both hands as he wrenched her out of her seat.

"How did you turn Yage against me? Did anyone help you? *Answer!*"

He relaxed his grip on her throat enough for her to gasp, "Sir... I never.... Nothing...."

"Liar!" Hogrum threw her across the bridge. Her body slammed hard onto the deck and slid a full meter before she stopped herself with spread palms and tried to rise. Hogrum was already there, and a kick to her abdomen coiled her to a fetal position.

"Security!" he shouted. "Take this traitor to the brig! Now!"

Lieutenant Nexel and his men hurried to grab Astraal. Holding her by other arm they dragged her off the bridge. Everyone stared after her, even when the doors had closed behind them. Then, one by one, they turned questioning eyes on their regent.

Hogrum couldn't stand them. He hurried off the bridge, back into the captain's salon. Doors locked behind him and he was finally alone. He felt like screaming. He wanted to break everything in this room with his bare hands. For years he'd worked carefully to build a government that was peaceful and



secure, for the good of the greater galaxy. Now everything was coming undone. Even his own people were betraying him. The carrion-birds of the senate would be next. He'd have to head them off as soon as he reached Coruscant.

Only a lifetime of learned restraint kept him from smashing up Worgaan's chamber. Instead Hogrum stood still and tried to calm himself with old Knight's mediation techniques. Deep breaths emptied his mind, but his heart smoldered on. The cascade of treason become hard fact, something to be rationally faced instead of raged against.

He looked back on his own actions in a new light. On the bridge all it had taken was a single look at Astraal to know she had betrayed him. Hogrum was intuitive, but irrational conviction didn't come to him like that, not anymore.

Or maybe it did. With mounting fear, he closed his eye, cycled his breathing, and fell back on old Imperial Knight techniques. He tried to spread his awareness and sense the crew in the bridge outside. And to his terror he could feel them: frantic, confused, tired, relieved. Over all those emotions hung a pall of dread at what came next.

It wasn't just projection. Those were Hogrum's emotions, but also the crew's. The Force had returned to him, like a knife-thrust in the heart.

After so long being deaf, to hear was overwhelming. Zonama roared with life: the chatter of insects and the song of birds, the slow spread of the forest canopy and the subtle decay and rebirth on its shadowy floor. In cities, deceptively primitive-looking for their low shell-like buildings which were themselves alive, Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans mingled, their separate rhythms now joined in a curious harmony. And somehow all those noises combined to make the single melody that was Sekot.

It was beautiful and smothering. After leaving the desolate mountaintop they'd flown to the Middle Distance, a large settlement built into the slash of a valley. Sentient life welled inside that gap; Jao could feel it even through *Free Agent's* bulkheads. He'd forgotten what it was like for the lives of others to press on his unbidden. After four years of silence he'd gotten used to solitude without realizing it, but now the Force

was back to remind him of the stunning interconnectedness of life.

Despite that, Jao felt very alone as he sat within the docked ship's cockpit. He wasn't used to flying this thing; his pilot's training had never been much and despite spending years aboard the freighter, he'd mostly watched AG-37 and Ania in the front seats.

The ship would never feel right without them. He didn't know if he'd feel right either.

Jao spent a long time sitting in Ania's chair, staring out the viewport at the other ships that had set down on the grassy landing field just west of the valley. Most were broad-winged, smooth-hulled organic flyers but there was also the blocky assault shuttle the mercenaries had used. Beside it was a Jedi shuttle with folded wings; apparently Masters K'Kruhk and Rasi Tuum had been chased here by hostile TIEs. Of the Federation fighters there was no sign, and Jao didn't know if any were still on the planet. He watched as two rebel shuttles appeared instead, killing their thrusters and lowering to the field's edge on repulsors.

As *Free Agent* set down they slipped out of view, but Jao kept watching the landing field anyway. Dimly, he felt new beings step foot on the planet. He wondered how many more would come.

When he heard footsteps coming down the corridor he didn't turn to look. Even without the Force he knew Sauk was the only other person aboard. The Mon Calamari stepped silently into the cockpit and hovered unspeaking behind Jao's chair. Ania's chair.

Eventually Sauk said, "I've been looking over A-gee. What's left of him."

"And?"

"Most of the cuts were pretty surgical. They didn't damage his main cortical matrix, as best I can see. Of course, there might have been a power surge when he got cut up, and *that* may have fried his matrix, but I really can't be sure yet. Droids aren't my specialty. Ships are."

He could hear the nervous tremor in Sauk's voice. "I know. Don't worry. We can find someone to fix him."

"I think Esseles might do it."

The name of that world, in reference to the Thrumble Foundation and AG-37's so-called 'mother,' roused different memories from Jao. He recalled his stupid spat with Ania over Kyra's fate, and Ania's subsequent kidnapping by Mandalorians who'd take her to her mother. It seemed so long ago.

He couldn't help but wonder might have been different if they hadn't fought, or if they'd been able to save Ania from the Mandos. Jao knew *what if* was a perilous road. It was pointless at best, harmful at worst. When Ania had stepped into the eruption she'd fulfilled her destiny as a Skywalker. It had been the fate the Force decreed for her and she'd been walking toward it all her life.

Still, he wished he'd been able to walk it with her for just a little longer.

Jao realized Sauk was waiting for a reply. "Sure. We can do that... once we figure out what else we need to do."

"Right. I guess... A-gee's not going anywhere."

It sounded callous but it was true. AG-37 was his friend, and Jao knew he should feel ashamed for putting the droid's needs in reserve. If there were any chance at getting Ania back he knew he'd leap for it, no hesitation.

At least he'd had a chance to say goodbye. That was better than what Kyra had gotten. The pain of that separation was plain, and from what little he'd seen of her since, the young woman seemed lost in absolute regret.

Jao could still get lost too. It would be so easy. He pivoted Ania's chair to face Sauk and asked bluntly, "Do you feel any different?"

The Mon Cal blinked. "You mean... the Force?"

"That's right. After what.... what they did back there, I thought it might be spreading out to everybody."

"I don't know." He looked at his webbed hands. "I don't know what having the Force *feels* like. I know the Jedi are getting it back. You and them are used to it, though."

"No," Jao said. "I'm not used to this. It's been too long."

"But it's familiar to you. Or it was. You remember what it's like."

Jao nodded. "Do you feel different in any way?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. I feel like I have this... energy inside me. But I might just be restless after all we've been through."

Jao wasn't. Just feeling so many things in the Force again was exhausting. Yet for Sauk the novelty of the Force might be different. It might creep up on him gradually instead of overwhelming him at once.

Jao hoped so, for his friend's sake.

A loud banging sound jarred him in the chair. Sauk swung and looked down the corridor. The banging kept up and he said, "That sounds like it's coming from the landing ramp."

"Someone's *knocking*?" Jao asked.

"Well, at least they have some manners," the Mon Cal muttered and went down the hall.

With effort, Jao rose from his seat and followed. On the way he put a comforting hand on his hip-holstered pistol. He'd once promised himself that he'd only take up a lightsaber again after getting the Force, but he didn't feel ready. He'd heard they'd recovered his old weapon along with the body of Darth Talon, who'd stolen it on Te Hasa four years ago and reconfigured it with a red Sith crystal. Yet she hadn't died like a Sith, and it seemed to Jao that removing her crystal would be disrespecting her last stand. And right now, he didn't feel ready to wield a lightsaber anyway.

He and Sauk went to the lower landing ramp and found another surprise clinging to a support strut. Sora Auch's looked smaller without her armor. Her face still had that pinched intensity, but it relaxed when they went down to meet her.

"Can we do something for you?" asked Sauk. "I already gave you your payment."

"I know. I came to say it checked out. We got what we were promised."

"That means we're settled, then," Jao said.

"I think it does. I just wanted to tell you that."

Jao and Sauk nodded, but Sora didn't move. He could feel her emotions in the Force, clouded and confused even to herself. He asked, "Are you leaving the planet now?"

"I think so. The admiral up in orbit asked me if I'd be willing to stay on and lend a hand in whatever he's planning. I haven't responded yet... but I think it's going to be a polite 'no.'"

"You've done a lot for us already," said Sauk. "Without your forces we'd have never held the planet until Stazi arrived."

Sora looked away; Jao caught a flush of embarrassment. "We

did what we were paid to do. Now we're taking our money and going someplace where we can enjoy it. Stazi's on the brink of starting a civil war. That's too messy for us."

Black Spear Company had already stood against the Federation regent and his fleet at two different worlds. Jao sensed her conflict on that; Sora regretted being dragged into such a situation but was glad they'd done it. She couldn't make sense of those feelings herself. Jao wondered how time, and possibly the Force, would affect her.

Sora released the support strut and faced them again. "No offense, but you're all crazy *shabuire* and I hope I never see you again."

"It's understandable," Sauk smiled and extended a hand. "We lead crazy lives."

Sora shook his flipper carefully, then grasped Jao's in a tighter shake. When she released her eyes lingered on his and she said, "I'm sorry you lost your woman."

Her words were soft with empathy, but they still hit hard. Jao couldn't muster anything to say, so he just nodded. Sora nodded back and stepped down the ramp. She curved out of sight and was gone but Jao stayed where he was. Sauk touched him lightly on the shoulder then went back into *Free Agent*, leaving him alone.

Standing on the ramp, Jao could see parts of the landing field he couldn't from the cockpit. He could spot what was left of *Mynock*, airlifted by Sora's shuttle from its crash site on the mountainside. Its massive engine had been gouged open and both wings were torn off. The main section had been dented by heavy impact and he doubted the ship would ever fly again.

Fitting, in a way. *Mynock* without Cade seemed even more wrong than *Free Agent* without Ania.

Despite the sorry shape of the craft, he could feel beings inside. Their emotions were intense, sharper versions of his own aching loss. A part of him longed to go inside and speak to them, but he recoiled. Maybe later, once he'd gained some traction with his own grief. He needed time to deal with things as he was now: alone and surrounded by the Force.

Even with wings torn off and main engine blasted beyond repair, *Mynock* might still have flown again, but the damage

went deeper than that. A quick survey showed the primary onboard computer had been crushed in the mountainside impact and hull stress had created hairline fractures that went all the way to the main power generator. To turn on anything but the backup power, which currently washed the freighter's stuffy interior with a dim yellow glow, would have risked a catastrophic explosion. *Mynock's* wreckage was exactly that, a wreck. Jariah had seen enough ships get smashed to know which were salvageable and which weren't. This one was on the wrong side of the line.

Despite that, he was reluctant to step outside. It felt like he'd be leaving Cade behind.

It would have been easier if Cade had been speared through some by evil Sith lord. Then Jariah could have turned grief to righteous anger and gotten some old-fashioned revenge. Instead all he had was a weird empty feeling inside, like his brother had left him with something but he didn't know what.

Deliah was stuck in the same quagmire. He felt her clearly; whatever Cade had done to the Force, everything seemed more vivid now, as it had when Jariah's powers had first awakened on Rohakalla. As a result, the Zeltron's grief was so intrusive he had a hard time separating it from his own. Still weak from her injuries, she loitered in the habitable areas in *Mynock*, checking every cabin and corner and wallowing in memories found there. Some of them were so intimate Jariah had to wrench his thoughts away from hers.

He tried to give Deliah space. The droids, sometimes an annoyance, were a mercy. Despite seeming so alive they were glaring blank spots in the Force, and as he sat in *Mynock's* crew lounge Jariah was able- mostly- to tune out C-3PO's self-recrimination.

"Oh, Artoo, if only I'd realized something was wrong," the protocol droid moaned. "That reports of communication malfunction from *Free Agent* should have warned me. For the comm system to die hours after a combat situation, instead of during, is not unheard of, but the odds for that model ship are no higher than twenty-three percent! I should have at least raised the issue!"

R2-D2 chirped something Jariah couldn't understand, but it sounded consolatory.

“Oh, I know you’re trying to make me feel better, Artoo, but it feels so... *wrong* to admit I could have done nothing. Even if it is true, it makes me feel like there is some fault in my core programming.”

That hit Jariah where it hurt. He was the one with the Force; he should have sensed Eli had hijacked *Free Agent* before its guns went off. But then, Cade hadn’t been able to save them either.

R2 hooted something low and mournful. C-3PO released a human-sounding sigh and his metal shoulders slumped forward. “I know I’ve been saying the same things over and over, Artoo. I have dealt with situations of terminal loss before, but this time it feels... different. Don’t you feel the same? For so long our fates have been tied to generations of Skywalkers in ways that defy all probability. But now there *are* no Skywalkers. After so long of finding them as the focus of my operations, it’s hard not to feel... bereft.”

Maybe staying with the droids wasn’t such a good idea. Jariah rose from the sofa and left them without a word. He only got a few steps into the hallway beyond when a body emerged from shadow. Surprise made him backstep and Azlyn Rae held up a hand for calm.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m sorry if I startled you.”

“Dammit,” Jariah grunted. “Didn’t even *feel* you.”

“I felt you,” Azlyn said, crossing arms beneath her respirator.

He looked at her hard. “So it’s back, then?”

“Whatever they did... whatever *he* did... it worked.” Jariah had already figured that much. Behind him, R2 tooted greetings, and Azlyn asked, “Are you hanging in there, Artoo?”

The droid tweeted, less enthusiastically. As Jariah led her into the dimly lit lounge, C-3PO shuffled forward. “Master Rae, welcome. I apologize for the poor condition of this vessel, but the extenuating circumstances—”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Threepio.”

The droid twitched, like he might apologize anyway, but he kept silent. Another body emerged from the gloom near the cockpit hallway, and Deliah asked, “What are you here for, Imp *cheeka*?”

Her voice was haggard and unwelcoming. Both women had

loved Cade at different times, in different ways, and Jariah hoped grief didn't make either of them- especially Blue- do anything rash.

Arms still crossed, Azlyn said, "I wanted to see how you were doing. And your ship."

"*Mynock* is trashed." Deliah dropped onto a sofa. Like the deck itself it lay slightly slanted. "Best she's good for is... scrap."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Well, she's just a ship."

Deliah's words bit with sarcasm. She'd spent years working over this old ship, which itself was one of Nat Skywalker's old refits. Deliah was the only person in the galaxy who knew all of its insides and she'd loved it for years. But losing *Mynock* was still the lesser pain.

To fill the silence, Jariah said, "You say you've got the Force back. Does that mean all your Jedi and Imp buddies have it too?"

"It's been coming back to them all. Some fast, some slow."

"But it's coming back."

She nodded. Softly Deliah said, "I felt you come in."

Azlyn and Jariah both turned to her. "You... *felt* her?" he asked.

"I knew it. I shouldn't have. Zeltron empathic skills only work when you're close enough to touch, but you, Imp *cheeka*, I could feel even before you stepped inside this wreck. I felt you hesitate, like you weren't sure you belonged here."

"I had no idea," Azlyn whispered. "I.... thought the Force might come to you too. But I wasn't sure."

"So that's what I've got now? The Force?" Deliah picked up a pink hand, splayed fingers, and examined it. "*E chu ta...* I don't... *feel* different. I don't think."

"A lot of what the Force does is reflect what's already inside you," said Azlyn.

"Stang. That's not good." She leaned her head back to the cushion, spreading blue hair. "I'm not exactly a saint."

"Neither am I," Jariah said. "But I'm managing."

"You've changed, *pateesa*. Not in a big way but lots of small ones."

"You gonna say I've grown up again?"



She rolled eyes to him. “No. But this power, this *thing*... If it’s in me, who else has it touched? The Vong?”

Azlyn breathed deep. “There’s talk of them feeling the Force too. It’s all very... scattered right now. Uncertain.”

“So what did Cade *do*?” asked Jariah. “Is everyone in the whole galaxy gonna get it now? ‘Cause we’ve seen a lot of murglacks- a *lot*- who don’t deserve to be anywhere *near* the Force. They’d do way more harm than good.” He didn’t add that until three years ago he’d considered himself one of them.

Azlyn shook her head. “I don’t understand what’s happening. No one does.” No one except Cade, perhaps.

It got so silent they could hear C-3PO’s joints creak as he shuffled forward. The droid said, “It seems to me there is no point guessing outcomes until they can measured empirically.”

“Spoken like a droid,” sighed Blue.

“Thank you, Mistress Deliah. As we have said, there is no way to predict the results of Master Cade’s actions, only catalogue them as they manifest. From our limited observation of widespread Force phenomena, it’s clear there are some spatial limitations to its power.”

“What do you mean?” asked Azlyn.

“Well, Mistress, when the Yuuzhan Vong were totally stripped of the Force, allegedly by their ancestral homeworld Yuuzhan’tar, the effect was localized to their galaxy, perhaps to their specific race. Likewise if the Whills, as Master Cade described, did limit access to the Force it was explicitly in this galaxy.”

Artoo released a thoughtful whistle.

“Well, you’re right, Artoo, our beliefs about ancient Yuuzhan Vong history are limited to oral history and hearsay, which is notoriously unreliable, but with no offense to Master Cade, the same could be said of his testimony.”

“So what you’re saying,” moaned Deliah, “Is that we have absolutely no karking idea what’s going to happen.”

“Well,” wavered the droid, “In light of the subjectivity clouding past records, our limited ability to intake new data, and the consistently unpredictable nature of the Force... That is correct.” The humans all sighed. C-3PO added, “Confounding, isn’t it?”

“Threepio’s right,” said Azlyn. “All we can do now is wait.”

“And figure out what to do about Chalk, Stazi, and all that interstellar power struggle *poodoo*,” added Jariah.

“Yes,” she said seriously. “That too. I just wanted to check on you all. You’re welcome to come outside and see what’s happening.”

“I just want to stay here for a while,” Deliah said softly. “Not forever, just... a while. You know, I think that damn Force of yours is making things more vivid.”

Azlyn understood that she meant memories of Cade. She looked around the gloomy cabin and said, “This ship and him were a perfect match, weren’t they?”

They were, and it made bitter poetry that they’d go out together. Jariah had always hated poetry.

R2-D2 rolled forward and whistled. C-3PO translated, “Artoo says he has a recording to show you.”

“Seriously, Artoo?” He sighed. “Another one?”

“What do you mean?” Azlyn looked confused.

“We had a little mess-up with Artoo’s memory banks,” Deliah explained. “Cade and Threepio have been taking him for walks down memory lane... Seeing all of the *grancha* Skywalker family tree.”

R2 warbled something else, and 3PO said, “Artoo assures me this is of more recent vintage.”

“Okay, fine.” Jariah placed hands on his hips. “Put it on.” Best get it over with.

R2’s holo-projector flickered on to show a bright, blue-white band of vertical light. For a second Jariah thought the projector was malfunctioning, and then he heard a rasping, pained breathe from R2’s audio grille.

Then he understood that this was an eruption of brilliant Force power left behind by the Tho Yor. As with the one he’d seen before, it made no sound whatsoever. It looked like R2 had been just meters away from it.

Then Cade’s voice scraped, “That’s enough, Artoo. I can take the rest on my own.”

The flutter of a black longcoat eclipsed the eruption, and they watched as Cade’s figure staggered toward the light. His steps were low and dragging and his torso was canted forward. One hand dangled limp at his side; the other seemed to clutch his stomach, like he was trying to hold it together. Cade moved

bravely despite the pain he was clearly in. Even when he drew close to the light he didn't hesitate.

And then, before stepping inside, he turned around to show his face. It was dirty and twisted in pain but there was a happiness in his eyes, and his tired smile lit them brighter.

"It's been a hell of a ride, buddy. Wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Jariah shuddered, like the words had been said to him directly. He watched as Cade turned and made his final steps, then disappeared into the bright pillar.

The recording winked out. It seemed to drop the room into darkness and silence. As Jariah's eyes readjusted to the low light he heard Deliah sniffing back tears. Azlyn stood closer, and Jariah could make out new determination on her face.

"What Cade did wasn't the end," she told him. "It was just the start."

Jariah knew that. And he knew, with a flash of conviction, he couldn't just sit out whatever came next. His brother had walked on bravely. It would shame him not to do the same.

The Middle Distance was a city built on slopes, and long meandering lanes cut up and down its length, walled in by low damuteks and corkscrew spires all grown rather than built. No two structures were the same and it gave the settlement the feeling of an oversized garden that had swelled out of the valley floor and overflowed its rim.

Kyra had expected there to be holes; strange unsettling gaps that felt like breaches of fundamental law. Her experience on Selvaris had left her anxious of a world where the Force only existed half the time. What she got instead of was an overwhelming sense of life. The beings who walked its streets were a mix, some blue-skinned humanoid Ferroans but mostly Yuuzhan Vong. All of them glowed with the Force's inner light.

During her short walk down its streets she'd seen a city standing still. The Ferroans were looking at the Yuuzhan Vong as if seeing them for the first time. Reactions among the Yuuzhan Vong themselves were more varied. Some walked around dazed but alert, heads lifted high to take in everything around them. Others ran up and down the long streets, calling

out in joy. Kyra had passed many clusters that had fallen prostrate to the ground to worship the earth itself. All of them were staggered by the miracle that had happened.

They had every reason to be. The Yuuzhan Vong had been banished from the Force centuries ago for the crimes their race had committed. Their civilization, once in perfect harmony with the Force, had become so twisted their gods had rejected them. After wandering the intergalactic void for generations they'd fallen ravenously on the newfound galaxy, and only the nobility of the Jedi had prevented them from remaking every world in their awful image. For a century, with the Jedi and Sekot for guidance, they'd crept back toward redemption.

Now, finally, the Force was with them again. Their gods had returned and they'd lost themselves in worship. Even as they screamed collective joy into the Force they emanated bittersweet regret that they'd been away for so long. This reunion had a harsh, undeniable beauty.

Kyra knew all of this intellectually, but it was very hard to share their joy. They were strangers, and the power that had blessed them was abstract and lofty. Her pains were personal.

Because it was all she could do, she tried to focus on the conversation happening around her. She'd joined a group of Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong inside one of the domed damuteks. Ganner and the other former Imperial Knights were absent and she didn't know where they'd gone.

"I've made contact with *Paramount* and spoken with Admiral Stazi," Saarai Derrol said. She wore a loose brown shift that camouflaged the stump of her right arm, lost for a second time. "He reports that Chalk's cleared the system but Admiral Yage's fleet is still hanging on the outer edge. They've made no attempts to contact Stazi and ignored all of his, but he's still trying."

"I still don't understand why Yage just pulled out of the fight," said Asaak Dan.

"Stazi says he has some idea... but he's not saying."

There was something reserved about Saarai herself. Kyra could feel her withdraw in the Force and wall off her feelings. She didn't intend to pry, especially as she was keeping her own grief private, but there was a paranoid edge to the Chagrian's reserve that seemed inexplicable.

If Kyra could sense it, Grand Master K’Kruhk surely could too, but the old Whiphid gave no sign. “The withdrawal is unusual and therefore suspect,” he said. “Stazi should not let his guard down.”

“I know,” said Saarai. “He’s alert for any ploy.”

Karrashchakkuk woofed, saying that this did not *feel* like a trap. Instead he felt more secure than ever.

“Be careful with your senses,” warned K’Kruhk. “The Force’s return is intoxicating. Judge carefully until you are used to its influence again.”

“That holds true for us all,” said Khat Lah. Along with the shaper Nei Rin and a few warriors, he was sitting to one side of the damutek. He rested elbows on knees and interlaced fingers in front of him. His head was lowered in a thoughtful bow.

“I’m sure this is momentous event for you,” said K’Kruhk. “You should stay with your people and help them. They will need guidance.”

Without raising his head, Khat Lah replied, “As will yours, I think.”

Kyra understood he didn’t just mean the Jedi. If the Force could open itself to the Yuuzhan Vong, it might spread across sentient galaxy-wide, and there was no telling the ramifications. Speaking for the first time in a while, she asked Saarai, “Has anyone in the fleet shown new sensitivity to the Force?”

The Chagrian shrugged uncertainly. “I mentioned to Stazi what’s been happening on Zonama. I tried to explain what that might mean but I think the admiral’s mind is on other things.”

“Like a civil war within the Federation,” Asaak said. “Having the Force again is a gift. We have to use it to keep the peace.”

“And we will,” said K’Kruhk. “But first we must consult with Stazi, *and* Yage if we can.”

“Stazi said he’s keeping the fleet over Zonama for the moment,” supplied Saarai. “He said any guests from the surface are welcome.”

“Then I will pay the admiral a visit. We have much to discuss.”

“I’ll go with you,” Asaak said. He was a Jedi again, but he was also a rebel eager to get on with the fight. Kyra envied him his certainty.

Saarai hesitated, but said, "I'll go with you too, Grand Master. You're stepping into politics now. That's my field."

"I have stepped into politics before." K'Kruhk's long-tusked mouth twitched. "I did not enjoy the experience, but necessity demanded it. As it does now."

He and Stazi had made two parts of a triumvirate. The third part was missing. Kyra still didn't understand what had happened to Marasiah, Cade, Marin and Ania when they'd stepped into the light. She only knew they wouldn't be coming back, and that was painful enough to eclipse any speck of joy.

"She left something behind," Kyra said. "Marasiah, I mean. She recorded a message with Ganner, Jao, and her other Knights."

"I know," said K'Kruhk. "I've spoken with Azlyn Rae."

Kyra nodded shakily. There seemed little point to her being here. The great and glorious power of the Force, which she'd once had nearly all to herself, was spreading wide. That gave no relief. She'd failed to be there for her friend because the needs of the galaxy had demanded it. Now the galaxy demanded nothing from her, and it was too late to save Ania. The bitter irony of it tightened Kyra's heart. There was no escaping her failure and no undoing it. Even the great and glorious Force was no help.

Standing beside Khat Lah, the shaper Nei Rin said, "I would like to accompany you as well."

K'Kruhk blinked small eyes. "Are you certain, Master Shaper?"

"Stazi is welcoming *all* visitors, isn't he?" She glanced at Saarai, who nodded. "Over the past decade my shapers have made enormous strides in undoing the Sith sabotage to the Ossus Project. On a half-dozen worlds, we have pushed back and nearly defeated the corruption. Those planets are filled with life again. Stazi- and the rest of the galaxy- must know."

Cautiously, Asaak said, "A lot of beings aren't going to be receptive. They'll say they've seen Yuuzhan Vong 'help' before. Stazi might be among them. Duro *was* one of the ruined worlds."

She shook her head. "I will not let Kol Skywalker's dream languish out of fear. Let me at least present the facts to Stazi. From there, I will let admirals and politicians decide."

"I respect your resolve, Master Shaper." K'Kruhk lifted his snout. "You may come."

Nei Rin snapped a grateful bow. Beside her, Khat Lah's shoulders shook. He lifted his head and moved one hand to brush his face. Kyra saw that he'd been weeping silent tears.

"We are no longer aliens to them," he said, strong voice trembling. "We are together in the Force, all of us. Finally. I prayed to see this day, but I never thought I would."

"We don't know what the Skywalkers have done yet," Saarai cautioned. "There's no sign anyone off this planet can touch the Force."

"Not yet. But there will be." Wet streaks gleamed on his cheeks and his mouth twisted to smile. "You should understand by now that in the Force all things are possible, and all things will be done."

Saarai looked away, and in the Force she drew deeper on herself. Kyra recoiled as well. The Force might work miracles but it wouldn't let her fix her mistakes. She was going to have to live with hers for the rest of her life.

K'Kruhk, Nei Rin, Khat Lah, Asaak, Saarai, Stazi: they all had parts to play in the galaxy's coming drama. So did Kyra, though hers stood apart. She had one responsibility left, and it was overwhelmingly hers. Its name was Eli Horn.

As the others got ready to move, Kyra said, "I'm going to need a ship to take me back to the mountain."

Asaak misread her. "Kyra... There's nothing left of them there."

"I know that." She swallowed hard. "But this isn't about any Skywalker. This is about Eli."

Khat Lah stiffened. "You think he is alive?"

"I don't think he was killed in the fight. That means he's stranded but around there somewhere."

"The area around that mountain is untamed forest," said K'Kruhk. "It would be a long search, with no guarantee of success. And at this point, Eli is little danger to us."

"I know. And I'm not expecting you to hold up your meeting with Stazi. I just need a ship and a little backup." Kyra passed a determined stare across the room. "You have your business to wrap up and I have mine."

No one objected. Capturing Eli, or killing him if she had to,

wouldn't numb the ache inside her, but at least she'd accomplish something, and this fix was long overdue.

It wouldn't give her what she needed, but she'd settle for what she could get. Despite everything, Eli Horn still mattered to her more than anyone else.



## Chapter Forty-Two

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A single Jedi shuttle, recognizable for its fat hold, two extended wings, and green metal hull, sailed into *Paramount's* hangar bay. Its wings folded over it back as repulsors lowered it gently to the deck, and a minute after that the landing ramp extended. The small herd that stepped onto *Paramount's* flight deck included knights with lightsabers at their waists and a Yuuzhan Vong shaper with hands respectfully clasped in front of her. As he stood at the head of the greeting party, Gar Stazi's eyes lit on Yalta Val, one of the senior Imperial Knights, now dressed in a plain tunic. At the center of the group, commanding attention both from demeanor and simple size, was Grand Master K'Kruhk. The old Whiphid took long, strong strides across the deck and his party followed.

The sight made Stazi believe he could turn back time-almost. The sight of Senator Derrol's widow instead of Porat himself reminded him what a long, strange journey it had been. It felt like they were building to a climax, but try as he might, he couldn't imagine an end to it.

He'd not generally put much stock in Jedi clairvoyance, but he hoped K'Kruhk came through this time.

After greeting each other, green hand shaking furred-framed claws, they retreated to one of *Paramount's* conference rooms, where Sukharr and Ekorian were waiting. The Trandoshan general welcomed K'Kruhk and, with characteristic bluntness, asked, "Is it true you have recovered your Force powers?"

That brought faint smiles from most of K'Kruhk's entourage. Only Saarai still looked down. The Whiphid said, "We have. Would you like a demonstration?"

“At this time, that’s unnecessary,” said Stazi. “But are you certain? After all this time, do you really believe things have gone back to the way they were before?”

“No, Admiral. In fact, I’m certain they’ve changed irrevocably. The only question is how much.”

That was a portentous comment, and Ekorian ventured, “We were told that Empress Fel was with you on Zonama Sekot. Is she still there now?”

K’Kruhk shook his head. “No. Marasiah Fel no longer exists in this plane.”

Stazi kept dismay off his face. He didn’t know why Marasiah had laid low these past three years, but after hearing rumor she was alive he’d hoped they could march together on Coruscant to oust Chalk. Having K’Kruhk with them, the triumvirate reformed, would have been the ultimate triumph. But as the Jedi had said, things had changed and wouldn’t change back.

“You use a curious phrase,” said Ekorian. “Do you mean that Fel is dead?”

“Not dead as you’re imagining,” said Yalta Val. “But that’s the easier way to think of it.” Ekorian and Sukarr exchanged skeptical looks. The Imperial Knight added, “The empress made a final statement before she passed into the Force. Those on Coruscant need to hear it.”

“You mean your fellow Imperial Knights?” asked Stazi.

“Them, and the senate. And the military. *Everyone*. What happened to Admiral Yage? His ships are still in-system.”

“Yes, and he’s refusing our hails,” grunted Sukharr.

“I was hoping to attempt another call, now that we have this larger group together,” said Stazi. “But first I want to be clear. Marasiah Fel is no longer with us?”

“That is correct,” said K’Kruhk.

“But the Force is, once again.”

“That’s truer than you know.”

Stazi had forgotten how annoyingly vague Jedi could be. “What about Zonama Sekot? The planet was mostly inert during the battle. Can it defend itself?”

“Once more, I believe it can. But will not allow itself to be used as a weapon, and I do not think it intends to move from this system.”

“I understand that. I wanted to clarify basic points.” As he

said it Stazi glanced at the Yuuzhan Vong woman, wondering where she fit into all this.

She noticed his gaze and bowed her head. "It is an honor to meet you at last, Admiral," she said in accented but clear Basic. "I am Nei Rin, Master Shaper."

"You were head of the Ossus Project," Ekorian said, voice cool and skeptical.

"Along with Kol Skywalker, yes. Ever since the Sith sabotaged our efforts, my shapers have worked to undo their corruption. On six despoiled worlds, we have succeeded."

The Drall's voice didn't warm. "Are you saying you've made these planets habitable again, like you promised fifteen years ago?"

"We have made substantial progress."

Stazi had heard this grand promise before and seen it end in disaster. Something in his gut told him he could trust Nei Rin, but he couldn't base his actions on mere feelings, not when things were so precarious. "This is interesting news," he allowed, "And naturally we'll study it. But at this time, we have other concerns."

"I know you do," said Nei Rin. "But please consider. We are willing to share all our research and allow independent investigators to see our work."

Stazi nodded; Ekorian and Sukharr said nothing. K'Kruhk gave a tiny snort; it sounded amused. "You are skeptical," the Whiphid said. "We do not blame you. But I believe this time we can work through the distrust that has separated our peoples."

"You are an optimist," Ekorian said, not approving.

"Perhaps. But as I said, much has changed. The Yuuzhan Vong have regained the Force."

For the first time this meeting, Stazi was truly surprised. He looked again at Nei Rin, whose thin lips tugged at a smile. It took him a moment to find a reply. "This is... stunning news, of course. Does this have anything to do with... recent events on Zonama Sekot?"

"It does," said Nei Rin, still smiling.

"Well," he breathed, and looked back at K'Kruhk. "As you said, the Force *is* with us. Do you have any other revelations, or should we try contacting Admiral Yage again?"

“By all means, try.”

Stazi leaned forward and tapped the panel in the center of the conference table. The line to the bridge clicked open and he told *Paramount's* comm officer, “Please send that hail to *War Hammer*, Lieutenant. Use the new message I gave you.”

“Understood, sir,” a faint voice replied.

Stazi stayed bent over the table, waiting. This hail would tell Yage that the reformed Federation Triumvirate was waiting to speak with him. Stazi had composed the message in hope and wondered if Yage would be satisfied with two-thirds of what was promised.

After nearly two minutes of waiting, a holo sprung to life in the center of the table. Stazi had set the conference room's receiver to transmit a full-range image, which meant Yage would be treated to a round table of electric faces. The admiral, appropriately, took in those assembled with two full sweeps of the head.

When his eyes fell back to Stazi, Yage said, “Where is the empress Marasiah?”

Val fielded that one. “I'm sorry, Admiral, but she's passed into the Force.”

Yage's eyes narrowed. “You mean she's dead.”

“Not as you think of it,” said Val. “But she's not here, and she never will be.”

“I'm sorry for misleading you slightly,” said Stazi. “But as you can see, I have Grand Master K'Kruhk with me.”

“I recognized the Master Jedi, and a few more of your rebels. Are you still trying to get me to join your little band?”

“You're clearly no longer part of Chalk's,” said Ekorian. “Why did you abandon him in the middle of a fight, Admiral?”

Yage's face seemed made for scowling. Expression drawn, he said, “I received strong evidence- from another source- that the empress was alive, and that Hogrum Chalk had robbed her of her rightful authority. And by extension yours too, Admiral. That's why I could no longer stand with him.”

The Drall's whiskers twitched. “What source was this?”

“That doesn't matter. Nor, apparently, does the empress if she's no longer with us.”

“She is gone, but she left messages for the senate and the Imperial Knights,” Val said.

Yage twitched with indecision. "I don't think I'm welcome on Coruscant. We've picked up comm chatter indicating Chalk is falling back toward the capital, and he's called Fenel to meet him."

Stazi knew that admiral. He'd been on Roan Fel's side for the whole of the war with Krayt, and he'd been as merciless as any of the Sith's men. They said Fenel had executed the massacre of Jhoram Bey's fleet, and Stazi didn't doubt it. "That's useful intelligence," he told Yage. "I understand if you don't want to wage war against fellow Federation soldiers. I don't either. I'm hoping to end this conflict without another battle."

Yage's hard gaze said how likely that was. "Admiral, I'm willing to lend you more intelligence as I get it, but I won't commit my troops to slaughtering their comrades."

"I respect that," Stazi said, though his heart dropped a little. His petty rebel fleet could have used Yage's destroyers. "Will you hold in this system for now?"

"For now, yes."

There was a short pause, and K'Kruhk interjected, "Admiral, there is something else you must know. Thanks to recent events on Zonama, the Jedi have recovered the Force."

Yage blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and tried again. "That's exciting news, of course."

"The Yuuzhan Vong have recovered it as well."

Yage had to think even longer after that one. "You say they've recovered it. You mean they can be felt in it, as they couldn't before."

"That is the start. But *they* can feel it as well. In time, I suspect many will learn how to use it."

Yage didn't seem to like the sound of that and neither did Stazi. News of their transformation had come so fast his mind hadn't fully grasped the implications.

"And there is more," said K'Kruhk. "Just as the Force has reawakened inside the Yuuzhan Vong, I believe it may have in *you* as well."

Ekorian was the first to break stunned silence. "Do you mean to say that all of *us* have the Force now?"

"You've always had the Force with you, even when we were all deaf to it. But you may begin hearing it as you never have before."

Half-awed, half-terrified, Sukharr rasped, "What did you *do*?"

"The empress is the one who did it," said Val. "And the other Skywalkers."

Stazi started to picture staid Marasiah and wild Cade joining wills to commit some final, sacrificial act. He hadn't asked for their sacrifice and didn't want it. The Force was useful, but he'd never *trusted* the Force.

Ekorian grasped for logic. "You say the Yuuzhan Vong were open to the Force. Is that because they were on Zonama Sekot when this... incident happened?"

"Perhaps," said K'Kruhk. "We don't know if proximity plays a role. Those of us who once used the Force recognized it quickly when it returned. For others, it is taking longer to notice."

Stazi grasped his meaning. "I assure you, Admiral, if I *did* have the Force whispering in my ear all of a sudden, I would know."

"So would I," snapped Yage.

"I'm telling you because you should understand what might happen and be prepared for it," K'Kruhk said calmly. "This is for the sake of your crew especially. They must be watched."

*Watched for what?* Stazi wanted to ask. As always, the Force was more confusing than helpful. He prayed it stayed away for whatever battle was to come. His eyes met the Imperial's and despite the blur of the holo they recognized that in this, at least, they were kindred spirits.

Night had fallen over this portion of Zonama, and the mountain peak was just a silhouette against faint predawn glow. The side door of the borrowed rebel shuttle was swung open and cold high-altitude wind rushed into the hold, but Kyra hung off the frame regardless and peered on the dark landscape below.

She felt life invisible beneath her: slow-growing bora trees, chittering insects, birds and small ground animals in nests and burrows. She couldn't feel the sentient, familiar mind of Eli Horn yet, but she was sure he was down there, and she'd search through dawn to a new night if that was what it took.

Four resistance fighters had volunteered to join her on this

mission, including two veterans from the Selvaris mission. Alasett and Selos stood further back in the hold, grasping the handles that dangled from the ceiling as the shuttle tipped into a right turn. Kyra kept clinging to the open doorframe alone, and Jao stayed right behind her.

As the shuttle began flying on a new vector she glanced back and noticed the lightsaber on his belt. "I'm glad you brought that," she said.

"At this point I'd be more comfortable with a blaster." He had to yell above the wind.

"That's what you were meant to have."

She meant it, but Jao didn't look sure. As the shuttle began another slow loop, Kyra focused on the blackness below. She found the same sprawl of vague life beneath, without any punctuation of sentience.

After a few minutes Jao shouted, "I don't feel him. Do you?"

"Nothing," she admitted.

"Maybe he's dead."

Kyra couldn't believe that. She'd have felt it if he'd died. It might have been an irrational conviction but she couldn't shake it. Too much bound her and Eli together.

More, she *needed* him to be alive, if only so she could defeat him. Jao had repeatedly assured her that she'd been doing necessary work in freeing Stazi, and that she should be proud of it. More, he'd pressed that Ania had chosen her fate freely and they should honor her choice by accepting it. He was a man trying to convince himself.

Kyra might be able to accept Ania's choice, but she couldn't forgive herself for never saying goodbye. Catching Eli wouldn't solve anything, but it would at least be balm on a wound.

And then, suddenly, she felt him. He was faint but familiar for his anger and his fear. She let his presence guide her hand as she thrust it out of the ship. "He's there!" she shouted, "I feel him! Take us closer!"

Holding the ceiling handles for stead, Alasett went to the cockpit and gave directions to the pilot. The shuttle tipped and dove and Kyra called on the Force to keep from falling out the open door. Wind rushed her face even harder and she felt Eli's alarm; he knew they were coming for him.

And then he was gone. He must have been clamping down on his emotions to conceal himself in the Force. Kyra pulled herself back into the hold and shouted, "Give us a light!"

Alasett relayed the order. As the repulsors kicked in and the shuttle hovered over the treetops, a spotlight glared down and turned the black space beneath them blinding white. Kyra squinted into the glare and saw leaf-thick branches trembling in their downward wind less than ten meters below.

Now that the ship had steadied, Selos came up beside her. The Jenet sniffed the cold air and asked, "Do you know where he is down there?"

If she'd been calmer Kyra might have traced his faint presence, but her heart was pounding and adrenaline pumping. "We'll find him," she promised. "Got your cables?"

"We've got them," reported Alasett as she pulled fiberchords from wall-mounted reels.

Kyra took one by the handle a single-handed grip. In her other hand she held her lightsaber. She looked at Jao, who mirrored the pose. They exchanged the tiniest nods, and a brush of shared confidence in the Force.

Then she shouted, "Let's go!" and gripping their cable tight they leaped out of the hold and into the dark.

They were coming for him. Eli had shut down his panic so- he hoped- he no longer broadcast his emotions to Kyra. He could still feel her out there. She was a dark star of anger and desperate need, and it seemed that not all of it was because of him.

But she'd take it out on him, no doubt. Eli fought the urge to run from the sound of the overhead shuttle. Instead he crouched in the darkness, watching spotlights flicker on the forest floor twenty meters away. He saw bodies drop on fibercables: one, two, three, four. From this distance, through the tangle of black branches, he couldn't make out many details, but one figure ignited a pure-white lightsaber in hand. That had to be Kyra.

He saw another blade too: red around white core. In shock he realized it was Talon's lightsaber and with a flush of stupid hope reached out with the Force, wondering if she might not be dead after all.



But she was, and he'd killed her. He recognized the man with her weapon as Jao Assam, and he remembered that she'd stolen the lightsaber from him in the first place.

*It doesn't matter what mistakes you've made. You can choose to start again, and the Force around you will reflect that.* Sekot had told him this. Once his mind had cleared, Eli admitted that was the most likely explanation for the strange boy he'd seen. The living world itself had seen fit to communicate with him. Those words lingered, but not in reference to himself. They made him think of Darth Talon.

No, not *Darth* Talon. Just Talon in the end, which was the amazing part. In losing the Force she had been liberated, and even found a better purpose than a Sith's. To Eli it was the ultimate justification that what he'd done on Rohakalla was right. It had all been for nothing, but it had been right.

His effort in the Force hadn't gone unnoticed. Jao turned toward him, and the red lightsaber bobbed closer, flashing in and out of view between black tree-trunks. Eli turned and hurried through the dark. On the forest floor he was likely to break his leg on a root or smash his still-tender shoulder on a tree-trunk, so he moved slowly but steadily away from the light. He kept his emotions shut down in the Force, praying they'd lose track of him.

They didn't. Smaller searchlights, the kind soldiers attached to rifles, swept horizontally through the trees until they found him. Eli used their light for extra guidance and dodged to the left. The light struggled to track. He dared look back and spotted the glare of twin lamps stabbing in the place he'd run from, but the two lightsabers were bobbing steadily toward him. The shuttle overhead was staying low and moving its own light to follow the runners.

And in the Force he felt Kyra barreling toward him. He tried to run in a new direction but his foot caught an unseen root. He stumbled and kept from falling but she was on him. He grabbed his lightsaber from his belt, spun, and ignited it just in time to catch the fall of her blade.

White sparked against white, illuminating both their faces. He saw the flush of the scar he'd made across her cheek, and the fire in her dark eyes.

Eli felt Jao coming in from his other flank and the two

soldiers trying to catch up. He dropped to his knees and rolled over his right shoulder; Kyra wasn't able to restrain herself and swung needlessly into the place he'd been. Jao came at him and swung horizontally but Eli stayed low and lashed at his feet. The Imperial Knight hopped over them, but while he was in midair Eli called on the Force and threw him hard into the dark.

He heard a body hitting tree but didn't see it. He was also turning to face the next attacks from Kyra. She was swinging recklessly but powerfully, and with his weak left arm it was a struggle to hold her back. In the Force she showed not just anger and need but *grief*, and he wondered what kind of loss could have made her like this.

Instead of blocking her swings he tried to dodge. He snapped his body back and felt the tip of her saber burn across his cheek, a mirror of her wound, but it gave him an opening. He snapped forward and thrust for her waist. Kyra twisted and barely missed being skewered.

Then, from the darkness behind her, a spray of laser blasts. The commando she'd brought with her had shut off her searchlight in order to take Eli by surprise. Very smart, but the Force was his weapon and he deflected the bolts back into the forest, illuminating the woman who'd fired them.

Eli had to go on the offensive to survive. He followed the clear path traced by the laser blasts, jumped into the air, and threw himself at the commando. She fired at him again but missed; he landed right in front of her and sheared the barrel off her blaster in a flash.

Instead of freezing in surprise she went for a vibro-blade at her waist. She was good but Eli was faster, and with a flick of the wrist he cut her through the hip, deep into the abdomen. Burnt flesh assaulted his nostrils and when he pulled his blade out she immediately dropped. Her felt her life fading fast in the Force, soon to be gone.

Then Kyra was on him again. White blade cracked on white. The shuttle roared low overhead and the spotlight shone down on them both, blinding them. With a growl Eli called on the Force, found the high-powered lamp affixed to the shuttle's underside, and crushed it with a thought.

Back to darkness. Eli didn't know where Jao or the other

commando were. He couldn't afford to care. He and Kyra danced around the dying woman's body, trading blow after blow. The only illumination came from the frenzied white strobing of their lightsabers.

The battle continued in harsh, ever-moving chiaroscuro while the shuttle waited overhead, blind but patient. After jumping away from a particularly harsh attack Eli felt something slap him dead in the back. He moved to the side, heart pounding, and saw it was the handle and end of a deployment fibercable, dangling through the forest from the shuttle below.

An idea came to Eli just as Jao rejoined the fight. He and Kyra were a ferocious double team, attacking him from both sides. By now they'd sniffed out the weakness in his left arm and were constantly trying to force his lightsaber to the right. He avoided more blows than he parried and he kept skipping away while they tried to corner him.

Eli waited until he was closer to Jao than Kyra and left himself open for a left-side blow. Jao took it before Kyra could come to help and delivered a deadly horizontal slash. Eli dodged it, let it go past, then flicked out his own saber and pinned the weapon low. Then he threw himself right on top of Jao, forcing his red blade to sizzle through the dirt. Jao's back hit the dirt but he immediately fought back, snapping a knee toward Eli's crotch. Eli angled his thigh to take the brunt of the impact and used both hands to hold his lightsaber on top of Jao's, keeping his left arm pinned across his body as he tried to pull his own blade free.

Kyra was coming at them but in the blackness she hesitated to strike. That gave Eli the critical second he needed to free his left hand and chop it against the inside of Jao's right wrist. That weakened his grip on his lightsaber, allowing Eli to interlace his fingers with the other man's and pry the weapon free.

At the same time he released his own white-bladed saber, rolled off Jao, and used the Force to throw the weapon, still blazing, at Kyra. She barely ducked in time to avoid the bright lance that continued until it lodged itself in a tree and went dark.

Jao lay prone between Eli and Kyra; she tipped her lightsaber forward just to see him. She hesitated on whether to help him

or leap over and charge Eli, and that was all he needed.

Instead of fighting, Eli turned. He reached out with the Force to find the dangling cable that had smacked him in the back and pulled it toward him. His hand found the handle, his boots the foot-grip, and he pressed the retraction button that reeled him into the shuttle.

As he rose into the air, needle-pointed bora leaves tearing at his clothes, Eli reached out with the Force. He sensed two more beings in the shuttle, one at the controls and one in the hold, expectantly watching the red-bladed lightsaber they thought was Jao's.

Eli used the Force to propel himself the final few meters through the ship's open door. He landed boots-first in front of the waiting soldier. A nudge of the Force was all it took to hurl the surprised man out the door, down into the forest. The pilot realized something was wrong but Eli didn't give her the chance to act. He charged into the cockpit and Force-hauled her from her chair. Even as he threw her across the deck and into the hold, she stubbornly reached for his pistol, pulled it out, and shot wildly past his head. With one more flick of the Force Eli cast her, too, into the dark.

Then he rushed back to the cockpit. He was unfamiliar with this model but the controls were simple. There were repulsors, there were the sublight thrusters. And there, he saw, was the hyperdrive.

Eli wasn't even sure where he would go. He just knew he had to be away from here. Away from Kyra.

He threw himself into the pilot's seat and commanded thrusters to full. He raced across the night-black forest and dipped so close he scraped the bottom hull before figuring out how to pull skyward. As he rose into the upper atmosphere alarms wailed and he remembered to close the deployment portal in the hold. Once he did, the vents hissed with new atmosphere; despite that he felt lightheaded, almost giddy for his escape.

But he wasn't done yet. Eli checked scanners and saw no ships approaching. Unless some of the ships in orbit knew to stop him, he'd have a clear path to hyperspace.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

The voice made Eli jump in his chair. He turned around and

saw that damned boy standing on the deck, apparently unphased by the rocking of the ship as it broke the atmospheric envelope.

"I'm not staying on your world," Eli told the boy.

"Then where? Who do you think will take you, Eli? You've made enemies of just about everyone."

"I did what was *right*. I tried to save the galaxy from the Force! From *you*!"

"Why did you think it needs saving?"

"Because I know what you are! You promise everything and you give nothing! Everything you do blinds people, darkness and light! You make us kill or die for no reason! You twist us from the inside and make us worse than we are!"

He realized he was screaming. Eli looked forward again and saw a field of pure starlight. He was free of the planet's atmosphere and would soon be free of its orbit, and that meant he was free of Sekot's nagging as well. But when he turned back the boy was still there.

"You're not real," he sneered. "I'm not even on Zonama anymore. I'm *imagining* you!"

"If you made me up, then everything I just said you meant for yourself." The boy cocked his head curiously. "That kind of hate destroys you from the inside worse than the dark side ever could."

Before Eli could reply there was a beeping from his console. He looked ahead, terrified of an incoming ship, but it was just a green light telling him he was free to jump to hyperspace.

He turned back again, ready to scream from a sore throat, but the boy was gone.

Force-vision or hallucination, Eli didn't know. He didn't want to. He began plotting a course to the only one place in the galaxy where he might be of use. It might be his grave. Eli didn't care anymore. At least he wouldn't die at Kyra's hands.

Heart still pounding, body still trembling, he completed laying his path, then flung himself into lightspeed. It didn't feel like escape at all.

From the viewport of her father's quarters, Zonama Sekot was just a green light, distinguishable from surrounding stars only by its color. Nonetheless, Gunner Yage's attention was drawn

to it. She'd heard of the strange planet but had never expected to see it. Certainly she'd never thought it might be the place where her fate turned.

"Do you plan to hold here until Stazi leaves?" she asked her father. Rulf stood by his desk, one hand clutching a glass of Sartinaynian wine. He hadn't offered her any yet.

"We have no place else to be," he said quietly.

"I can think of quite a few. Chalk will be moving against the senate, and probably other parts of the government too. He can't afford to be subtle now that Stazi's back."

"And the Force." He glanced at her sideways. "Don't forget that."

"I still don't understand how that could be."

"Neither do I, but Jedi mysticism has always been beyond me..." Rulf took a small sip of wine, waited, and swallowed. "They say the empress did it. Some act of... self-sacrifice. Becoming one with the Force."

Gunner was sure that was something else she didn't understand. "So for all purposes... the empress is dead."

"The Jedi are loathe to use the word, but for us mortals that seems the best one." Rulf paused. She felt him weigh secrets before he turned to her. "Whatever she did, she didn't do it alone. Your brother was with her."

Somehow, she'd been expecting that. "So Cade's.... gone too."

Rulf nodded seriously. Finally, he picked up his wine-bottle by the neck and poured her a glass.

Gunner took it, drank, and savored its bitter sweetness. She'd never liked Cade and most of the time either wished they weren't related or that he never existed at all. Or both. Now that he was gone she found she missed him acutely. The parallels to her mother did not escape her.

She took another sip and looked out the window. Zonama Sekot remained as a distant, cool-colored light. Gunner didn't know what Cade would be doing in a situation like this, but it wouldn't be sitting around, waiting for somebody else to make things happen.

"Chalk could marshal Fenel and the other admirals," she said. "He could hunt us down, and Stazi too. The numbers are on his side, even with the Jedi back."

"I know. But I'm no rebel, Gunner."

She looked at him sideways. "Correct me if I'm wrong, father, but didn't you once shoot a Sith captain in the back of the head?"

"Yes," he said seriously, "And then I proclaimed my allegiance to my *true* emperor, which is what I should have done all along. That was fixing a mistake. This..." He waved a hand. "I have no empress to swear to, and I can't stand by a usurper."

He was an Imperial at heart, with no more Empire to follow. Rulf's dilemma was, she thought, a common one. "What about the senate? If they make some kind of appeal rejecting Chalk and calling for help, would you respond?"

"That senate is more than two-thirds Alliance."

"It's the only other government we have. And Alliance or Imperial, they all took the same oath. We're supposed to be part of a Federation now."

He looked suspicious. "You're a soldier, not a politician."

"In times like this it's hard to separate one job from the other."

"True. Too true." He swallowed a big mouthful of wine. Rulf looked out the viewport again and so did she. "There's something else. The whole thing is... incredible. I'm sure it's all mystic Jedi rubbish but they seemed quite insistent."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Jedi say the Yuuzhan Vong have the Force now. They can feel it and be felt. With training they might even use it. And they say the same is true for us."

A single disbelieving laugh escaped her, but Rulf's face was serious. "Father, that's... completely absurd. We've never had any of those... those *things* inside us that are supposed to connect to the Force."

"K'Kruhk says they are irrelevant now. He says a more powerful, more unifying Force has opened on the galaxy."

"And it's absurd. I don't feel different. Do you?"

"I'm not sure." He looked back toward the planet. "If they say the Vong have the Force now I believe it. Maybe it has something to do with that planet. We never got closer than outer orbit and neither did Stazi, and he claims his people haven't been affected either."

“What about the Jedi and Imperial Knights on other worlds?”

“I haven’t heard anything either way. This... awakening in the Force is probably just some localized fluke.”

Part of Gunner wanted to think so. Another, surprised part wanted it to be something more. It seemed a crime for Marasiah Fel and Cade Skywalker to have sacrificed themselves for a fluke.

“Does this change anything?” she asked.

“No,” he shook his head firmly. “Until we see hard evidence, it’s just Jedi rubbish. We don’t even consider it in our plans.”

“And what *are* our plans??”

“I’ll not become a rebel, Gunner. I’m a soldier for order and law. If the senate requests my action, I’ll obey. But until then I’ll serve no false master, and neither will you.”

That sounded a little like a rebel to her, but Rulf was deadly serious. He raised his glass just a little, like a salute to the true masters gone by. Gunner would rather salute to the future, but because that was so unclear she joined her father in a muted toast. To an emperor and an empress, a mother and a brother, all gone by.

The sun came up over the Maridun savannah like it always did. After cresting the low ridges on the horizon it rose higher, shedding its original red-gold splendor to become hot white moving slowly through a blue sky. Morning dew burned off quickly in the dry air. Small animals, active through nighttime and dawn, retreated into the shadow of burrows or the scattered copses that dotted the high-grass plain.

As the sun grew higher Shado Vao left the cliffside site of his home and walked across the savannah. When he reached his usual hill the sun was higher and shadows spread wide beneath the tree. He sat down, cross-legged, and waited for them to come to him.

Today he set to arbitrate between the Whisper Grass tribe and another Amanin clan called the Long River. They were skirmishing over grazing rights and had come to blows, though no one had yet been killed. That would make things a little easier, he hoped.

For a species without chronometers or mechanical time-pieces, the Amanin were impressively punctual. As the sun



neared its peak in the sky, Shado spotted one dust-cloud approaching from the east and another from the west. They grew closer to the same pace and soon two clusters of Amanin had rolled to a stop, unwound their flat bodies, and were approaching him from either side of the hill.

Shado took a deep breath and prepared for another session of listening and judgment. These arbitrations had become a dry duty long ago, and he took little satisfaction from them anymore. Yet as the Amanin grew closer, he felt a small spark of confidence.

The speaker for the Whisper Grass tribe went first, thanking Shado for giving them audience before outlining the supposed offenses of the other tribe. Long River gave a rebuttal, equally passionate, but as he listened to that spokesman's words, Shado felt a growing certainty that Long River had started the skirmish. There was no defensive edge audible in their speaker's voice, but he heard it anyway.

As the two tribes presented argument and counter-argument, Shado's attention drifted from their speech. Normally he needed to listen closely to understand their language; now the meaning behind their words came to him easily and fluidly. He felt the long aggrieved history between the two clans and knew that both sides were prisoners to a past equal parts real and imagined.

When the time came for him to pass judgment he struggled to respond. It wasn't just the enormity of his realization but the realization itself. These were things he shouldn't have known but did. They'd come to him unbidden, and there was only one place they could have come from.

Shado had thought the Force had spoken to him before, on Bakura. That had been a delusion, vanity mistaken for something better. But at that time he'd been desperate for the Force's validation. He'd long since given up on that, and at the realization it might be with him again, Shado felt not joy but dread.

He couldn't bring himself to give the tribes proper arbitration. He explained that he needed more time to decide on judgment, and with palpable disappointment both groups of Amanin descended the hill and rolled off in different directions. As soon as they were gone, Shado got to his feet and hurried

through the hot afternoon sun, back toward his anchorage on the plateau escarpment.

In the shadowed isolation of mudbrick walls, he sat down on the floor and tried to meditate. It had been so long since he'd actively used the Force that he'd nearly forgotten how. After much struggle he found an inner calm and tried to spread his awareness outward across the savannah. He thought he felt the low background hum of plant and animal life, but he couldn't be sure.

Shado decided to reach farther. He'd always had a mild bond with his sister Astraal. She'd never trained to take advantage of her inborn powers but she'd been able to respond to him nonetheless, even when he tried to link their minds over great distance.

He had no idea how great that distance was now; it had been months since they'd spoken. But he attempted now to find the place within himself reserved for his sister, and in looking inward he looked outward, trying to find Astraal's resonance in the galaxy beyond Maridun.

He was out of practice and it took him a very long time, but eventually he found Astraal, or thought he did. Her presence was familiar but tainted with fear and pain. That shocked him so badly he lost his mediative state, and though he struggled to regain it, Shado was unable to find Astraal in the Force again.

If he was feeling her in the Force at all. If this wasn't some colossal delusion on his part.

There seemed only one way to be sure. Shado left his hermitage and climbed higher, to the place atop the cliff where he'd left his Twintail fighter. The ship was covered with a broad sand-color tarpaulin that had protected it from sunlight and hypothetic spotters, but not from three years' worth of wind-blown dirt. After pulling back the tarp and climbing up the cockpit ladder, Shado brushed away the latest accumulation of dust before opening the hatch and dropped himself inside.

Without starting up any other systems on the ship, he activated the communications array. He had to wait several long minutes to hear the electric hum of energy run through the console and see its lights glow. He immediately attempted to call Astraal on the frequency they'd used in the past. It was

supposed to be secret and secure, shared only by them. He waited and waited, but nothing happened.

His feeling of dread intensified. On her stop-over weeks ago, Azlyn Rae had left her contact information and Shado had, somewhat unenthusiastically, input it into the ship's comm catalog. Now he called it up, pulse racing, and prayed she'd answer.

He had to wait a long time and was about ready to give up when the console's main light turned green with a completed connection. Faint static buzzed over the cockpit speaker grille until he heard that familiar voice.

"Shado?" she asked. "Is this you?"

"It's me. Azlyn, I..." His voice cracked out of a dry throat. There was so much to ask her, and only one place to begin. "Azlyn, is the Force... back?"

Her reply seemed to take forever. Then, gently, she said, "Shado, you've missed a lot."

## Chapter Forty-Three

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When the *Jagged Fel* left hyperspace and arrived at Coruscant, Hogrum Chalk received the brief, dizzying sensation that he was suspended over a hive of vermin. When he saw it from the viewport of the captain's salon he felt as though he might fall into it and be consumed by the snapping jaws of a million petty animals, all gathered to rip his corpse into tiny bits, and once he was gone they'd fall on each other with mindless frenzy. The elegant artificial whorls of light across the capital's night-black marble filled him with revulsion so strong he thought he might vomit.

But nausea passed. He wasn't dead yet. Wounded, but not dead. He told himself that repeatedly, almost frantically, as the shuttle carried him from the flagship to the government palace.

He'd had a long ride inbound and enough time to formulate his plan of attack. Much would depend on the next few conversations. As much as he loathed depending on others, he couldn't do this alone.

First he summoned Sigel Dare to his office. Since the death of Antares Draco and the treason of Treis Sinde, she'd become the official leader of the Imperial Knights. She was a proud woman, and it was clear she rankled at both her own Force-blind helplessness and the Knights' loss of prestige. She was also a proud Imperial, and that meant she'd carried out her regents' orders despite her frustrations. For Sigel, duty always came first. She was in many ways an admirable woman; it was a shame she'd become a threat.

He could immediately tell that something had changed when she stepped into his office. Her head was lifted higher and the

pride was back in her eyes. But professional that she was, Sigel snapped a short bow and asked, "What do you need of me, Regent?"

"For now? Words." Hogrum stood on the other side of his desk. Galactic City glittered in the late-afternoon light behind his back. "You've heard, obviously of the incident at Bavinyar."

"I have, sir."

She volunteered nothing more, and Hogrum knew she was waiting for explanation. "I received word that resistance leadership had convened there. I rushed there with Admiral Yage to stop them personally. However, they were able to escape and rendezvous with their fleet."

It was what he'd said in his brief statement to the senate. Sigel responded with a nod and a touch of disappointment.

"I have not announced it publicly yet, but the resistance has freed Gar Stazi from his prison on Selvaris."

Sigel nodded again, unsurprised.

"These rebels are craftier than I expected, and they've won a moral victory, but the advantage is still ours. I will not lose that, Master Dare. I won't allow the galaxy to be plunged into anarchy again, especially not by the ones who murdered our empress. To do that I will need the help of all the Imperial Knights."

She lifted her head higher. "We know our duty, sir."

"Good." He sensed skepticism from her, but also that cool devotion to the cause that had always been her hallmark. He hoped it lasted for a few hours more. "Now I have question for you, Master Dare. Have you or any other Imperial Knights regained the Force?"

She blinked, and a tiny smile softened her face. "I believe so, sir."

"How many? How strongly do you feel it?"

"It's... complicated, sir. Many us have gotten used to *not* feeling the Force, and to have it touch us again... it's taking getting used to."

"But it's come back to you all?"

"It seems to be, sir. I know I've felt it, here." She lightly tapped her breast.

"I see. I've felt it too. This turn of events is... surprising."

“Do you know the reason for it, sir? Does it have anything to do with Stazi and the rebels?”

He felt honest curiosity in her question, which meant she hadn't been in contact with Yalta Val. Naturally he had all her communications tapped, but it was good to be sure. “I don't know how the Force has come back, Master Dare. And I don't know if it's entirely a good thing. There are many Jedi fighters in the rebel ranks, and more sympathize with them. Certainly we can no longer think of them as allies, and with stakes are high as they are, we can't trust them to be neutral either.”

“You want us to move against the Jedi, sir?”

“No. Not yet. Master Dare, I want you to call all Imperial Knights on Coruscant to the training academy. I'll speak to you directly at 1700 hours and discuss how we'll proceed. This is a very important meeting, and I expect as many Knights as possible to be there.”

“That should be no problem, sir.” They both knew that, given their limited role nowadays, there were no Knights active off the capital.

“We're coming to a crisis,” he told her. “I want to make sure the Knights understand the risks and the stakes. And I want them to know their duty.”

“We'll always known it.”

He liked her defensiveness. It meant she'd prove herself by doing exactly as he asked. “I've never doubted that, Master Dare. Please, go back to your Knights and give them my message. I will speak to all of you later this evening.”

“Very good, sir.” She snapped another bow, and with a whirl of scarlet cape she walked out the door.

He'd felt her honesty there. Sigel was one of the younger generation of Knights and a prideful Imperial with no affection for the Jedi. She would do as he'd ordered and probably give her Knights a talk beforehand, imploring them to stand with their regent in these difficult times. It was a shame not all could be so steadfast.

With a sigh, Hogrum tapped the control panel and his desk and said into the comm system, “Please summon Admiral Fenel. I want to speak to him in person.”

“Yes, Regent,” came the reply. The deep, male voice startled him. He'd been expecting Astraal Vao.

Weariness and nerves were getting to him. Astraal was currently in the *Jagged Fel's* brig, locked in her cell after receiving several jabs of drugs from an interrogation droid. Once her mind was appropriately garbled, she'd admitted that she'd spied on his conversation with Marasiah at Bavinyar and sent a recording to Rulf Yage. That explained the admiral's treason, but Hogrum couldn't trust that she'd stopped there. He'd never expected Astraal to have the skills to slice into his secure frequency and watch the transmission, and there was no telling what other talents she might have. Clearly, he had underestimated her.

Like the questioning of Ania Solo, this wasn't something Hogrum could task to just any interrogator. There was no telling what dangerous truths Astraal might spill. He had loyal operatives on Coruscant whom he trusted to pick apart her brain more thoroughly, and he'd transfer her to them when he had the time.

Much as he doubted it, he hoped the interrogator droid had already clawed out her secrets. If only Yage knew the truth it, could be bottled up again.

When Eduoard Fenel arrived the sun was further down in the sky and shadows were starting to spill off Coruscant's skyscrapers. Fenel snapped a firm salute and said, "Reporting as ordered, Regent."

The admiral was another fierce Imperial loyalist, and he was also no fool. He'd heard all the rumors from Bavinyar and probably some from Zonama Sekot. He surely knew about Yage and wanted answers, so he'd know what steps to take.

Hogrum had considered at length how to deal with Fenel. Like Sigel he was an idealist, which meant he chased an imaginary perfection, but while Sigel found hers in the Force, Fenel's was materialistic. He valued rigid order and stability, and most of all he valued the history his government embodied. Hogrum knew that during the Empire's civil war he'd stayed with Roan Fel not because of disgust at Krayt's brutality, but at his audacity to upend the existing order.

How that bode for Hogrum he couldn't say, but he'd resolved himself to make a gamble. Without Fenel's fleet his rule was a lost cause. He needed it on his side absolutely, and for that he had to risk telling the truth.

“Regent, I’m glad you recalled me from Yaga Minor,” Fenel said after lowering his salute. He was much more brazen than Sigel. “Clearly we have much to discuss.”

“We do. I’m sure you’ve heard the official statement by now, and more besides.”

“I’ve heard things,” Fenel said evenly. “I was hoping you could corroborate or deny.”

Time to out the first truth. “I said I went to Bavinyar to capture rebel leaders. That was a lie. My real goal was to destroy an object the Jedi had found that would allow them to regain use of the Force.”

Fenel took that with aplomb. He was no lover of Force-users. “I understand the Bavinyar mission was... unsuccessful.”

“It was. And that is why we’re reaching a crisis.” Hogrum put fists on the desktop and leaned forward. “Admiral, the Jedi have regained their powers, and many of them are on the side of the resistance. You already know that Stazi’s been freed from his prison. Up until now the rebels have been an annoyance. Now they’re a real, serious threat.”

“What about the Imperial Knights? What about *you*, sir?”

“Our old powers are.... coming back to us.”

“And that frightens you.”

Hogrum raised a brow. The perceptive comment was unlike Fenel, who normally concerned himself with wartime strategy over personal evaluations. He remembered Eli’s warning that if the Force were reawakened it might start affecting those it hadn’t before. He’d almost forgotten the possibility among all his other worries.

“I can use the Force,” he told Fenel. “The Force is in my blood. But I’ve never trusted the Force the way the Jedi- or our Knights- do.”

“Are you afraid some of ours might side with the Jedi?”

“I am. But their loyalty isn’t the only thing suspect. I’m sure you’ve heard about Rulf Yage.”

“I was hoping for the full story, sir.”

“Yage has removed himself from my authority, along with the three star destroyers he brought to Bavinyar. As best we can tell, he hasn’t thrown himself in with Stazi yet.”

“I know Rulf. There’s a conflicted man behind that stubborn face, but he’s not an anarchist traitor. He values order and



law.” Fenel gave those last words a touch of reverence.

“I’m aware of that, Admiral, but I’m afraid it might not be enough.” Hogrum took a deep breath. “Though he didn’t explain his reasons before turning traitor, I believe he’s come to the conclusion that Marasiah Fel was *not* murdered by rebel terrorists. Instead, he believes I overthrew my niece in order to seize power myself.”

“Ridiculous,” Fenel sneered.

Time to make the ultimate gamble. Hogrum stood on the precipice’s edge, then stepped off. “It’s true,” he said. “It was the only way to save the Federation.”

He couldn’t recall seeing the admiral stunned speechless before now. Fenel sucked breath through his teeth and looked away. He thought about walking out of the room right there, but to his credit Fenel made no hasty judgments. He was an idealist, but not a fool.

Eventually he turned back to Hogrum and said, “Explain.”

Not even a *sir*. Hogrum let it pass. “I apologize for nothing. The Federation was falling apart. Alliance terrorists, working with the Sith, had tried to kill her once and murdered her husband. She ignored their threat. Grief for Draco clouded her judgement and, worse, her desire to be a *fair* leader ruined her ability to do what was *right*.” He drove his point home with some Imperial patriotism. “We’d already lost the senate. We were losing control of the executive branch as well. Once the Alliance took over the government they’d have used their numbers to quash our kind. Someone needed to step in to stop it and preserve Imperial authority.”

Fenel watched him with guarded expression, but in the Force his anger brewed with cold consideration. Then he surprised Hogrum again.

“You didn’t kill the empress. Did you?”

Maybe the Force really was starting to whisper to Fenel. “The body found in her apartment was planted and the genetic evidence forged. I kept Marasiah imprisoned- comfortably- for weeks until Jhoram Bey’s rebels tried to break her out during the attack on Galactic City.”

“Ah,” Fenel’s eyes lit. “Then they came with Senator Derrol and *Mon Sepor*. That was their distraction.”

“Precisely,” said Hogrum. Let him think the attack itself had

been meant as cover for the escape, instead of a coincidence. One half-truth among whole ones would sell the package. "Marasiah escaped, but I was able to track her to Bey's fleet. I was left with no choice but to destroy her. And *that*, Admiral, was why I ordered you to leave no survivors."

Fenel hadn't flinched when ordered to perform that massacre. He didn't flinch when remembering it. Hogrum's confidence swelled; his gamble would pay off.

But Fenel's voice was cold when he said, "You ordered me to commit regicide, without my knowing."

His monarch bothered him, not the thousands of other lives he'd taken. That was good; Hogrum could assuage him the one death that mattered. "Marasiah escaped. She lay low for years and was on Bavinyar just days ago."

"Then she's alive?"

He recalled Eli's stories of that Force-eruption which had nearly consumed Cade Skywalker. "No. I believe that, as the Jedi would say, she had become one with the Force."

Fenel screwed his face at religious jargon. "Then the empress is gone? Is that what you're saying?"

"I am, and not by either of our hands. You understand why I had to give you that order three years ago, Admiral. I know you do. Combined Marasiah and Stazi could have plunged the galaxy into yet another war. They had to be stopped."

"And Stazi still has to be stopped." Fenel's lips still twisted but Hogrum felt his anger subside. The rational part of him was taking over again. "What about the senate?"

"The senate will have to be handicapped. Now that Stazi's free, Brighton and the other Alliance partisans might start rushing to his side."

Fenel was no lover of democracy; he nodded acceptance. "And the Imperial Knights?"

Hogrum sighed. "I'm afraid they may also become a liability. Now that the Force is with them, they are uniquely powerful... and uniquely unpredictable."

"Those Knights swore oaths to the Empire, sir."

Back to the *sir*. It was almost done. "They swore to follow their monarch. Later my niece relaxed their oaths so that they'd serve the light side of the Force above all." He shook his head. "She was going soft even then."

"The senate can be corralled and controlled, with force if necessary. The Knights are smaller in number but a different kind of dangerous."

"I'm aware." He looked out his window. Shadows had eaten most of the city and the sky had turned sunset-bronze. Not much time, now. "I have a plan in place to deal with both. I need your help, Admiral, to make sure Coruscant stays secure."

Hogrum was already certain he'd won. This was just the confirmation. Fenel gave a brief salute. "I swore my oath to defend the Empire, sir, even from enemies within."

"Good. Once the ones within are taken care of we'll have plenty without."

"I know Gar Stazi and how he fights. His soft heart is his weakness."

"That and his meager fleet. I've already sent orders for Admiral Slossar to be relieved of duty. That will keep his fleet in a state of chaos, unable to help Stazi's."

"And Rulf Yage, sir?"

"Yage is a traitor and he'll be dealt with. But not yet. I'm hoping we can demolish Stazi without his getting involved."

"One enemy at a time. I understand."

"Go back to your ship, Admiral. Review your intelligence on rebel activity. You'll be charged with leading the offensive. What's left of Yage's fleet will be placed at your command."

Fenel smiled at the thought of such an armada. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank *you*, Admiral, for understanding the necessity of these actions. I don't take pleasure in any of them, but I will not allow the Federation to self-destruct, or what's left of the Empire to be dismantled." With a sneer he added, "And I won't allow the Jedi and their Force to rule the stars again."

It was a good note to end on. Fenel gave him a firm salute, turned, and left the office.

When he was gone, Hogrum felt so exhausted he collapsed in his chair. Hate washed over him like a tsunami. He hated Coruscant and all its petty, greedy billions. He hated the Imperial Knights for their pompous obstinacy, the Jedi for their self-satisfied righteousness, the senators for their vanity masked by lofty platitudes. All of them were vermin, frenzied little animals chewing at the galaxy trying to claim their little

piece. He wanted to stomp them all underfoot until they were destroyed. But instead he was left to govern them, a caretaker for stupid beasts.

By the time Hogrum rose from his chair, the lights on the skyscrapers outside were turning bright and the sky had gone dark. He glanced at the chronometer: one hour until he was due to speak to his Knights. He left his office, made his way to his apartment in the adjacent palace wing, and felt just a bit of peace within its walls.

The furniture was old and elegant, in royal Hapan style. Rare visitors assumed it reflected fondness for his homeworld, but that wasn't true. His sister's lightsaber, placed reverently on a countertop by the window, said the real truth of things.

For a long time after Elliah's death he'd been overwhelmed by the need to see her again. Gradually that desire had gone cold, along with everything else. He could no longer remember what it felt like to be warmed by her smile or inspired by her bravery. Even her idealism, her belief that better actions made a better galaxy, felt pitifully naïve.

But he remembered, without a doubt, that he'd loved her. He didn't remember the love, just the fact that it had existed once, a long time ago. As he waited for the appointed time, Hogrum took Elliah's lightsaber from its stand. He ignited the pure-white blade; it came to life with no hesitation, even after so many years without use. He'd thought this weapon could right any wrong, once. He'd learned to use worse ones later, after Elliah's had failed her.

Hogrum stared at the sword until he lost track of time. The hum of his commlink, left on the counter-top, jarred him. He shifted the lightsaber to his left hand and picked up the comm.

"This is the regent," he said.

"Sir, I've gathered the Knights in the training center," Sigel told him. "We're awaiting your presence, but your aide says you haven't left the palace yet."

"I'm sorry, Master Dare. I've been delayed slightly. I'll be with you in a moment."

"Understood, sir."

He flicked off the comm but didn't lower it. Instead he stared into the window, through his reflection, to spot the Imperial Knight's training annex jutting out of the palace's north side.

When he reached out with the Force he could feel the lives packed with in, confused and expectant, quietly joyous to have the Force once more.

Hogrum turned his comm to a new frequency and hailed the channel. A voice said, "This is Besh-Seven-Niner. Awaiting orders."

"This is Command Grek-Six-Two. Execute."

"Yes, sir."

The line clicked off. Hogrum waited and watched. Exactly thirty seconds after he killed the link, a brilliant explosion blew out one wall of the training center. The fireball furlled into Coruscant's sky and the palace complex was rocked so hard the glass holder for Elliah's saber fell from the counter and bounced on the soft carpet. Outside the fire burned and would for a long time. He'd set his best agent on that job, the same one who'd rigged the explosion in Marasiah's apartment. This blast was on a larger scale and would claim many more lives.

Hogrum was loathe to play the same trick twice, even after it had worked well the first time. If he hadn't felt so hounded he might have come up with something better. As it was, he hoped it would do the job.

He switched his comlink to a third channel, opened it, and said, "This is the Regent. All palace security forces are ordered to assist at the training academy immediately. Galactic City is to be put on lockdown until further notice and a security cordon is to be erected around the senatorial facilities. No one is to be allowed in, or out. The rebels have attacked us again, but we will not allow them victory."

There was no hiding place for Saara. The halls of *Paramount*, which had almost felt like home, seemed suffocating and she avoided the eyes of crew with whom she'd worked and fought for years. The one saving point was that this not Zonama Sekot. On that planet she'd felt like she was drowning in the Force, pulled away by an uncontrollable undertow that would kill her.

She had to resurrect old Sith skills to push it away. Though her father had taught her to fuel her power with anger and desire, he'd also told her how to cut it off when she felt out of control. She did that now, steadying her breath, clearing her

mind, emptying herself of specific desires. When she felt empty inside she was free of temptation.

And that's what the Force was, temptation. It whispered dark promises, and though she knew they wouldn't keep they were so sweet it was hard to resist. Right now, the promises were small-scale. She could use the Force to twist a crewman's mind and push him away, or to twist Stazi or Yage into doing her bidding. When things got worse- and they surely would- the promises would become more dangerous. Embrace your rage and scald your enemies from the inside. Choke the life from them with your mind. Force them on their knees and revel in their debasement. She wanted to do all those things with Chalk and his minions. She wanted to drink their agony and bathe in vengeance.

But that was the lie. There was so much the Force had never offered her, things like love and bravery and selflessness. She'd had to get those from Porat and the others in the resistance. The Force was an intoxicant and she stubbornly refused a single sip. But even then, she was terrified. The Sith had taught her ways to wall off her emotions too, but she had no idea if she was succeeding. It might have been paranoia, but the eyes of the Jedi aboard seemed to linger on her, K'Kruhk's most of all. There was no telling what powers the old Whiphid claimed.

But at least she was no longer on Zonama. At least she no longer had the eyes of a world on her.

Saarai was in her quarters, striving for emptiness, when her comlink buzzed. When she took it from her desk and turned it on, she heard Starets say, "Miss Derrol, your presence is required in the briefing room."

It was late at night shipboard time. That meant this was an emergency. "I understand," she said. "I'll be there."

She threw on an informal tunic and walked down thankfully-empty halls, but she felt the life bustling in the conference room. Even without going through the door she knew Stazi was in there, as well as K'Kruhk and a few other Jedi. She braced herself, found a little emptiness, then went through the door.

Instead of sitting in order around the table, everyone was on their feet and in groups. Stazi was talking intently with Ekorian and Sukharr, while K'Kruhk and Karrashchakkuk towered

above a cluster of Jedi peers. It was Anj Dahl who separated herself from Monia Gahan and came up to Saaraï.

"It's about time you're here," Anj said. "You're missing the lovely chaos."

She braced herself for anything. "What sort of chaos?"

"Reports from Coruscant say there's been an attack on the Imperial Knight headquarters. Lots of casualties. Galactic City's been put on full lockdown in response. Senatorial buildings cordoned off, airspace cleared by the navy, everything."

"It's Chalk," she said instantly. "He's doing the same thing he did at the trial."

"We're waiting on a lot of facts. Things are hectic, and—"

"It's him. He's playing the same trick twice."

Anj sighed. "I had the same thought. We should have known Chalk was going to react, but I wasn't expecting this. His own Knights?"

"They're not his anymore, not if they've got the Force back."

Anj seemed hesitant again. She looked at the group of Jedi and Saaraï caught one Imperial Knight, Yalta Val, among them. He and his three cohorts might be the last of their kind. It was a grim thought, and reminded Saaraï that if she wanted vengeance on Chalk she'd have to join a long line.

The room's disparate chatter was silenced by the banging of a hand on the table. Everyone turned to see Sukharr with three-handed claw pressed hard on the top. Standing beside him, Stazi said, "You've all heard the news. Coruscant is under martial law. This is clearly a power play by Chalk. I'm sorry to say he's managed to preempt us."

"He acted fast, sir," Anj said. "There's nothing we could have done to stop it."

"Whether we could or not is irrelevant. The issue is how this alters our plans."

Saaraï hadn't sat in on the military talk, but she knew they'd planned to show Marasiah Fel's last message to the Imperial Knights and the senate. The task now looked impossible.

"We were expecting difficulties," said Stazi. "We can still meet them. As you all know, Coruscant is a maze with countless paths. We still have agents on the ground who can help us insert into Galactic City, even when it's on lockdown."

“We need to get onto the planet first,” said Val.

“Indeed. According to our sources, command of the core fleet has fallen to Edouard Fenel. That’s no surprise. He’s always been the most ruthless of the Empire’s admirals. I’m going to try to speak with Admiral Yage for help on getting people past the planetary cordon and down to the surface. And from there, our agents will take over.”

“What’s the goal here?” asked Monia. “Are we to show Marasiah’s message to the senators? That will be difficult, with them in lockdown.”

“Our sources say the senators are being kept in their apartment complex. Appropriate, since most of them were asleep when the attack was staged. Senator Gahan, you lived in that building for years. You too, Miss Derrol. I’m hoping you two can help us.”

Monia nodded, but Saaraï froze. Being thrust into Coruscant’s heart and facing Chalk’s minions was exactly the thing she didn’t want. She’d never be able to resist the dark side there. Yet Stazi was right; the mission would need her. Along with Porat, she’d mapped the insides of the senatorial residence tower from top to bottom. They’d memorized secret routes to the underlevels, pathways no other residents had seen. That was the only reason she and Porat had been able to escape arrest during Chalk’s initial coup. Not even Monia had that knowledge.

She realized others were staring. Monia fixed her with goggled eyes and said, “I know it’s very dangerous. I should be able to guide them by myself.”

It was permission to be a coward. Porat would have hated her for it. Instinctively, Saaraï said, “No. I’ll go with you. I now several secret ways into that tower. Even Chalk’s people won’t find them all.”

That got approving nods from around the room. Only K’Kruhk’s tusked head stayed still, his beady eyes focused on her. She forcefully looked away and waited for someone else to speak.

It was Yalta Val who said, “I need to talk with my fellow Knights. What happened tonight was a disaster... and if Chalk is responsible, another crime. I’m sure Jao, Ganner, and Azlyn will want to go to Coruscant as well.”



"The Jedi also stand to help," said K'Kruhk. "I'm sure this insertion is not the whole of your plan, Admiral."

"No, it's not," said Stazi, "but right now I haven't finished considering the military aspects. I want to talk to Yage in person and see if I can get anything from him. After that... I expect we'll be ready to begin the operation. The longer we delay the more time Chalk has to harden his hold. We won't let that happen."

"A few hit-and-runs might soften things up, sir," Anj volunteered.

"I thought you'd say that." He beckoned with a finger. "Commander Dahl, with me. Let's discuss."

The group broke up into smaller pieces again. Anj joined the circle of military officers. The Force-users fell into their own cluster. Monia, standing beside Saarai, put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for agreeing to help. I know there are risks, but it has to be done."

She could barely nod. Monia was speaking of death, but Saarai feared things far worse. She could barely hold herself against the Force's temptation now. Once she got to Coruscant and found life at risk she knew the barriers would come down and she'd allow her old Sith training, so pounded into her as to become instinct, would take over.

Saarai looked toward the Jedi and saw K'Kruhk staring at her. She flinched again, then risked a glance back. He was still looking. Monia noticed their eyes and asked, "Is something wrong, Saarai?"

Yes, like Monia could never know. Live or die, this mission would break her. Her Sith training left her helpless against the Force's black temptation.

Only the Jedi might know another way.

Saarai's whole body trembled; her knees unlocked and she pitched forward. Monia was still on her shoulder and the Mon Cal helped her lean against the table.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "Do you need water?"

"No," Saarai said, though her voice scraped. "Just... leave me be."

Monia was doubtful, but she backed away. When Saarai stood straight and picked up her head, K'Kruhk was still looking.

She felt ready to break here in the conference room. Maybe she had to break. There was no escaping the Force any longer; she had to confront it, and it would be safer for everyone to meet it here instead of where lives were on the line.

So she walked around the table on trembling legs, sometimes touching its top for stead. K'Kruhk withdrew from the group of Jedi and stepped up to her. The Whiphid seemed towering, and she tilted her head back to look at his wide, tusked mouth. He waited for her to speak first.

Saarai swallowed, licked her dry lips, and said, "Master K'Kruhk... I have a thing to tell you."

In the end, the only place Eli could go was where he'd already been.

It was like a repeat of the last time he'd thrown himself into Chalk's hands. After he surrendered his ship to the star destroyer above Galactic City, they'd taken him down to the planet and put him in a blank anonymous interrogation room deep inside one of Chalk's intelligence facilities. The only difference from last time was that there was no ysalamir blocking him from the Force. Maybe Chalk was in short supply of them. Maybe he was confident in his awakened abilities.

When the door opened, the man entered alone, with no spherical interrogation droid hovering over his shoulder. Eli sat in the chair in the middle of the room, unmoving. They hadn't bothered to strap him down. Chalk stepped close and loomed above, staring down with one real eye and one electronic red one. He was a black cloud of anger in the Force, and Eli knew he could die in this chair.

He spoke carefully. "I know I've failed, and that there's no undoing what I've done. But I swear that I did everything in my power to stop them from awakening the Force. You can feel that in me, can't you?"

He opened his grief and regret, hiding nothing. Chalk considered. "If you failed so miserably, how are you still alive?"

"I was wounded during the battle at the mountaintop. I lost consciousness and had to go into a healing trance." He twitched his left shoulder. "Your medics looked at me. They can confirm that."

“How did you escape?”

“Kyra took a group and came after me. She found me in the Force, but I outfought her and took the ship.”

“When you surrendered, my men found this on you.” Chalk pulled his cape aside, revealing two lightsabers hooked to his belt. He placed his hand on the red-bladed weapon Eli had brought from Zonama. The other was unfamiliar to him; it wasn’t the lightsaber he’d seen Chalk use before.

“Where did you get this?” Chalk said, removing Talon’s weapon from his belt.

“That’s my old master’s.” He looked up into Chalk’s face. “I killed her.”

“Darth Talon? Truly?”

“Yes,” he said, and let the honesty of the statement flow through the Force. He tried to hold back the regret.

“If you killed Talon, who wounded you?”

“She did.” He swallowed. “Cade Skywalker was also there. Together they slaughtered Colonel Rayez’s troops on the mountaintop. It was like... nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“Skywalker,” Chalk growled. “Tell me that meddler is gone.”

“All the Skywalkers are gone, sir. Including Marasiah.”

“Small relief if the Force is back.” Chalk looked down at Talon’s saber. He thumbed the handle, extending a humming red-white shaft just inches past Eli’s shoulder. Holding it perfectly still he asked, “What more do you think you can do for me?”

He was surprised how unafraid he was. Maybe he didn’t want to live if he failed here. Maybe he didn’t want to live at all. But he didn’t want to surrender; he’d spent the past three years fighting the Force and he continued toward that aim on pure inertia.

“I’ve made mistakes, sir. Many. But our goals have always been the same. We wanted to keep the Force silent—”

“And that is *impossible* now.”

“But we can silence its users. You’ve already purged the Imperial Knights. Now all that’s left is the Jedi.”

“Perhaps. You said Skywalker could open the Force to *everyone*, even those who never had midi-chlorians.”

“Is that happening?”

“Perhaps.”

The thought filled Eli with terror, but he tried to be rational. “Even if others are getting the Force, they won’t know how to use it. The Jedi do. That makes them the greatest threat”

“I agree. Do you have a plan to fight them?”

“No,” he admitted. “But I’ll help you however I can.”

Chalk’s scarred lip twitched. “You mean you’ll obey my commands?”

“Yes, Regent.” Eli hesitated, then dared the truth. “Frankly, sir, you need all the help you can get.”

That lightsaber hovered inches from his neck, still frozen in place. From the corner of his eye Eli saw it twitch and fall. Before he could breathe relief he was stunned by a sight he’d never expected, one he’d never even tried to imagine.

Hogrum Chalk started laughing. It sounded almost like a hacking cough, or an air recirculator on verge of dying. The bitter sound lasted only a few seconds, and when he was done Chalk released the lightsaber’s trigger, flipped it end-over-end, and offered it pommel-first to Eli.

He stared at Talon’s weapon and thought of his master. Her liberation from the Force had broken her of the Sith’s chains and her final actions had been more noble than anything she’d done before. To him it was the final proof that he’d made the correct choice at Rohakalla, and even if the Force could no longer be silenced it might be contained.

He reached forward and took the weapon in hand.

## Chapter Forty-Four

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When Shado Vao arrived on *Paramount*, he looked like a man wandering through a dream. He walked a wavering line across the flight deck, looking in all directions before each unsteady step. He repeatedly paused to breathe the recycled air deep. When two crewmen came out to service his old Twintail fighter, he stopped and stared at them for a good thirty seconds, probing them with the Force as he did so. He only turned away once they gave him confused looks.

Azlyn watched it all from the edge of the flight deck without interrupting. Shado needed time and for now, at least, he had it. Even after he spotted her waiting for him, he walked slowly, always looking and feeling. When he reached her he said, voice soft with marvel, "There's so much life."

Despite all that had happened and would, Azlyn smiled. "I'm glad you noticed."

He looked around the hangar again, marking each crewman at work. "It's... overwhelming. Even without the Force it would be hard, after spending so much time alone, but *with* it..."

He trailed off. Seeing him in this light, removed from his hermitage on Maridun, Azlyn would see he'd lost a lot of weight, and his blue skin had taken a pallor. She asked, "Have you felt anything more from your sister?"

"No. I don't *think* she's dead..." Shado let that statement lay.

"Well, as you can see, we're pretty busy here. And we've got a lot of work yet to do."

"I heard about what's happening on Coruscant. Do you have a plan?"

"We're putting one together. You know about the Imperial Knights, then."

"I know about the bombing. Were they any survivors?"

"I don't know."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Azlyn."

"Well," she muttered, "We lost a lot of friends already."

Cade yawned between them. Shado said, "I still don't understand what he did."

"I don't think any of us do. But I think I have some idea. Come on, Shado. Let's get someplace private."

She led him out of the hangar and down a few short halls to a modest crew lounge. At this moment it was thankfully empty. She could feel his relief at being alone, but she was glad just to *feel* again. The Force resonated in the lives of everyone around her, making every experience richer. In the time before- that was how everyone was calling the days before the silence- she'd felt conflicted between the two Force-using schools who's trained her. Now all those differences seemed so small.

There was no such joy from Shado, and reasonably so. She told him, "We've gotten confirmation that the *Jagged Fel* is over Coruscant now. It went straight there from Zonama, so your sister is either on the ship or on the planet."

"I need to get there. To either one. I... think I could tell which with the Force." He was unsure of his abilities, and more besides.

"Well, you're in luck. We're putting together a mission to Coruscant now. We've got something the senate needs to hear. The empress' last will and testament."

She'd already told Shado, in brief, what had happened to Cade, Marasiah, Ania, and Marin. Bleeding fresh regret he said, "I wish I'd been there. I know things couldn't have gone any other way... I just wish I'd have done something. For my own sake."

A long time ago, Azlyn and Shado had been two corners of a trio, with Cade- vital, talented, restless- as the most important part. Twice before they'd thought him dead. Now they knew it, and that made all the difference.

"Nobody was there to see him go in," Azlyn said. "But Artoo-Detoo recorded it, if you want to watch."

Shado looked away, ambivalent. "He's gone. That's all that

matters. I'm trying to think of the last time I talked to him. It might have been when all this started four years ago. But still, it was good knowing Cade was out there, being Cade..." He smirked, sadly. "Causing trouble."

"We're the ones who have to be troublemakers now."

"I know you have your duty to the empress, but whatever you're doing there, I don't think I can join you. I *have* to rescue Astraal."

Losing a chance to say goodbye to Cade made his need acute. Azlyn put a hand on his arm. "Don't worry. We'll help you. We've got a full schedule planned for Coruscant, but we'll get Astraal back. I promise."

"Do you know how you're getting people into Galactic City yet?"

"No," she admitted. "I'm just the messenger. The rest is getting hashed out by people higher up than me."

Time went by, and Stazi was getting the uncomfortable suspicion that K'Kruhk's wild claim about the Force awakened might have basis.

There was nothing measurable and nothing he could be sure of. Yet when Stazi interacted with his staff officers he increasingly felt that he was not just hearing their words, but divining the minds behind them. When Captain Starets explained how difficult it would be to insert people on locked-down Galactic City the young human kept his voice level, but Stazi had sensed his frustration was near to overflow. When Anj Dahl described how manpower limitations would hamper a military offense she'd done it with her usual casual tone, but worries bled through. Sometimes, walking down the halls and spotting passing officers, the weight of their expectations felt physically heavy.

There was more to the Force than increased empathy. Jedi, Imperial Knights, and Sith all used it to manipulate objects and minds. Maybe Stazi might be able to learn those skills too-maybe *everyone* might- but he couldn't afford to distract himself with those possibilities. He needed to do what he did best: fight the enemy.

He'd just finished a planning session with Starets, Anj, and Sukharr and was nearly back to his quarters when his comlink

buzzed and the captain told him to get back to the situation room. There was something he needed to see.

The Force, or his hyperactive imagination, wasn't telling Stazi if this was good news or bad, so he braced himself for anything when he walked back into the conference chamber. Everyone he'd just met with had returned, and several other officers had joined as well.

"Give me a sitrep," Stazi said. "What have we got? News from Coruscant?"

"The Outer Rim actually," said Starets. "We've picked up reports of skirmishes in the Seswenna, Parmel, Vivenda, and Grumani sectors."

The resistance didn't have any ships in those areas. "Between what parties?"

"Federation and Federation, sir. From the chatter we've picked up, it looks like battles among the forces commanded by Admiral Slossar."

The Sluissi was the only former Alliance admiral left in an otherwise Imperial-dominated Federation navy. For the past three years, Hogrum Chalk seemed to have kept him on as something of a token to assuage the Alliance-dominated senate. Slossar's people had spent most of that time cleaning up the aftermath of the Ssi-Ruuvi/Nagai invasions in the Outer Rim, and Chalk had seeded plenty of Imperial-trained captains into the fleet.

He must have decided to assert full control now, and it had backfired. Starets started reading off the scattered reports coming in. One even declared that Coruscant had lost contact with Sluis Van, Slossar's homeworld and the site of the largest naval base in that quadrant of the galaxy.

If this was the kind good fortune the Jedi meant they say said the Force was with you, Stazi would take it. But he tempered that with the knowledge that the Force might just as well work in Chalk's favor.

Stazi tasked Starets to make contact with Slossar, then called more personnel to the situation room. Within fifteen minutes the chamber was crowded with new arrivals, among them his intelligence director. Ekorian furnished Starets with contact information for sympathizers in the Sluissi government, who in turn were able to get a line to Slossar.



Stazi would have preferred to speak to his old colleague privately, but he'd have to make do with this massive audience. They at least gave him a little berth so the comm system's receptor could image him clearly.

"Admiral Stazi, it does wonders to see you," hissed the other admiral. The holo cut off the lower half of Slossar's serpentine body, but retained the large eyes, short snout, and wide fleshy hood that spread from either side of his head.

"And you, Admiral," Stazi said. "I'm hearing many conflicting things about you. I'm hoping you can clarify."

"I'd say the same to you. Clearly you are free and leading the resistance."

"I barely had time to change out of prison clothes before they thrust it all on me. I've engaged Hogrum Chalk's flagship in an inconclusive skirmish. Admiral Yage has withdrawn himself and three of his destroyers from Chalk's service, though right now he insists on neutrality."

"Yage is an Imperial stalwart. How did you change his mind?"

There was no point in holding back now. "We have proof that Marasiah Fel was deposed by her uncle in a coup. Though she is no longer with us, we have her last statement and are hoping to show it to the senate. Can you help us with that?"

It took a moment for the enormity of Stazi's statement to settle. Then Slossar said, "I'm sorry, but I don't see how. All of Coruscant is under lockdown, especially the government district. The system is being heavily patrolled by Admiral Fenel's forces. Any of mine would be fired on instantly."

That was a disappointment, but Stazi tried a grin. "You've gone full mutineer, then?"

"Chalk tried to have me removed from command and arrested. My crew did not agree. From there... things have spiraled. I still have command of seventy-four percent of my initial forces. The rest have fled to the Core or been destroyed."

"Is Sluis Van yours?"

"Yes, and I'm sure Chalk will try to counterattack. But we've built this system to defend itself. I cannot spare all of my ships, Admiral, but I can give you some."

"I appreciate that. The resistance has a valiant heart, but their fighting machines are out of date."

“What is your current flagship?”

“I’m speaking to you now from *Paramount*. It came from the old Alliance Third Fleet, via Celanon’s local militia.”

“How old is it?”

“Forty years.”

Slossar chittered, amused. “I can do you better than that, Admiral. But tell me, what is your battle plan?”

“We need to keep Chalk off-balance. We were planning to launch a series of fast hit-and-runs on different targets. All military, none civilian. We’ll force Chalk and Fenel to spread a wide net to defend. What you’re doing will help that. Hold Sluis Van as best you can and draw off his resources.”

“Even with both our fleets we’re vastly outgunned.”

“I know. The only way to settle this without a prolonged civil war is to turn the senate against Chalk. We don’t have a plan to get people on Coruscant yet, but I’m working on it.”

He had some ideas in mind. Once he was done with Slossar, Stazi tasked his officers to work with the others admirals’. Intelligence-sharing and logistics had to be figured out before any joint operations, but his crew was already overflowing with confidence from this sudden news. Even half of Slossar’s fleet would quadruple their forces, allowing them to strike extra targets and confound Fenel even more. It was like the earliest days of his campaign against Krayt, all hit-and-run, but now he had many more ships at his disposal and a weaker enemy.

As Stazi retreated to his personal quarters, he couldn’t tell if the ebullience he felt was his own or that of his crew, compounded by the Force. Maybe it was even both.

His cabin gave him the privacy he needed for this second conversation. He patched in a direct call to Admiral Yage and was pleased by his prompt reply.

“Admiral Stazi.” The human nodded. “I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“You’ve heard the news from Sluis Van, then.”

“I’ve heard about the chaos in the Outer Rim. Is it true Slossar’s taken the shipyards?”

“He has, and we’re setting provisions for joint operations. You could play a part in them, Admiral.”

The human shook his head. “My answer from before stands.

Chalk may have gotten his throne wrongfully, but he is still the regent. And frankly, Slossar's actions make me even *less* inclined to join in. This is fast becoming another civil war."

"And we can end it by deposing Chalk. I'm not asking for your strength of arms today. I need help in other ways."

"Intelligence sharing?"

"Precisely. If we knew the disposition of the Federal fleets at their major staging points, it would greatly help my campaign."

"I've been locked out of that information. Slossar's intel would be the same as mine anyway."

"Then give us something else. I need to get people onto Coruscant to speak with the senate. Slossar says the entire system is locked down by Fenel's forces. Do you have anything, materials or intelligence, that might help us pass?"

Yage got that stubborn, reluctant expression again, but he didn't say no. Instead he looked away and mulled. Stazi got no sense of what he was thinking; apparently his new Force-powered empathy, or overactive imagination, didn't carry across the holo-transmission.

Finally Yage looked back at him. "*War Hammer* recently received a supply transfer from one of Fenel's ships. We have two cargo shuttles aboard that are currently listed as belonging to their original host star destroyer. I have no idea if these will pass a security cordon or not."

It would be a gamble; if Fenel's supply officers were quotidian enough they'd note the missing ships and have them removed from the fleet registry. But if they'd overlooked them, which was very possible given the current chaos, those shuttles might be the key to ending this.

It was a gamble, and the best chance they had so far. Stazi didn't hesitate to take it. "Admiral, if you'd transfer those ships to *Paramount*, I'd be most appreciative."

"I thought you would be." Yage looked like he wanted to say more but held back.

"Is there anything else?"

"At this time? No. I don't think so. You'll get your shuttles within two hours."

"Excellent." Stazi could have turned off the comm, but he hesitated too. "Admiral, have any of your crew demonstrated... symptoms of the condition the Jedi described?"

Yage thought again before saying, "Honestly, Admiral, if they were, I have no means of diagnosing them."

Stazi allowed a little smile. If asked the same question, he'd have given the same non-answer. "I thought as much. Thank you for your help so far. You may have just changed history."

Yage blanched, like he was none too pleased with the prospect. He nodded without a word and shut off the transmission.

There wasn't much left on Zonama Sekot. The once-crowded landing field outside the Middle Distance had been most abandoned as resistance ships rejoined the fleet still holding at the system's edge. It made the wreckage of *Mynock* look especially forlorn as Jariah and Deliah started taking detailed stock of the ship, charting what could be resold for scrap and what they'd have to toss in a burner. Because they had nothing better to do, R2-D2 and C-3PO helped with the process.

The work was miserable. It felt like they were dismantling their own lives piece by piece, reducing them to nothing. With every chunk of equipment they stripped off it was like they were giving away a piece of Cade, and once they'd gone through it all everything of their friend would be gone too.

In the Force, Jariah could feel Deliah's displeasure in perfect harmony with his own. They hadn't talked about what they were going to do after this. Jariah had tried thinking about it and come up with nothing. Maybe they wouldn't even stay together. Cade had been the glue connecting them to each other. When Jariah tried to imagine what his life would have been without Cade, he saw himself becoming another one of Rav's vicious thugs. Mostly likely, he'd have gotten gunned down in the middle of some crime, just like his father.

He'd come a better man because of Cade. Maybe even because of the Force he'd had thrust on him. That just made him hate this job even more. He felt like he should have been doing something better, bigger, maybe even nobler.

Instead he was picking through the garbage of his life.

Even through his misery, Jariah could feel two beings approach him as he crawled on top of *Mynock's* wreck and tried to remove the supplementary power core for the topside laser cannons. He and Deliah must have been brewing up a real

stink in the Force too, because he felt the newcomers hesitate before stepping nearer.

With a sigh, Jariah came out of his crouch, stood, and turned. He was about to give a rude greeting and froze. It was no surprise to see Kyra standing on the landing field, ankle-deep in green grass. Shado Vao was totally unexpected.

Jariah started an awkward clamber to the ground but Deliah got there first. She eyed Shado from a meter away, reading him with Zeltron empathic skills and her new Force sensitivity. Then she stuck out a hand.

Shado shook it, blue clasping pink. "It's good to see you and Jariah again. Really."

They'd never seen Shado was a friend exactly. The goody-goody Twi'lek had been more like Cade's nagging hanger-on. But there was a new heaviness in the Force and in his eyes, and Jariah knew he wasn't now the righteous paragon they'd known. It made him like Shado more.

The Jedi explained, in brief, that he'd been in seclusion for the past few years. Getting the Force back had roused him to his senses and, more, shown him that his sister was in danger. Jariah remembered Astraal fondly, pretty blue *cheeka yum yum* that she was.

"I'm sure she'd being held on Coruscant somewhere, or Chalk's flagship," Shado explained.

"What did your sis ever do to him?" asked Deliah.

"I'm not sure, but I think it might have something to do with Yage's halfway mutiny. The point is, she's in trouble."

He was giving them imploring eyes. Jariah scoffed and waved at what was left of *Mynock*. "Sorry, *pateesa*, but we're fresh outta rides. Your eyes shoulda told you that."

"I know. But even if that ship could fly, there's no way you'd get it through the security cordon around Galactic City."

"Then what are you coming to us for?" Deliah asked.

Now Kyra spoke up. "Stazi's procured two shuttles from Yage. They're originally from Admiral Fenel's fleet, which means they should be able to get us down to Coruscant. Once they land, teams will spread out and take specific targets in Galactic City." She tapped off three fingers. "The senatorial complex. The Federation News Bureau transmission center. The shield generator control tower."

“So you can take the shields down?”

“So we can keep them up. Once Chalk realizes the senate’s turned on him, we don’t know what he’ll do.”

The young woman bled severity. Jariah had heard that her mission to capture Eli Horn out in the forest had gone belly-up, and she was probably berating herself for that. “What’s your part in all this?” he asked her.

“None.” She looked to Shado. “I want to help Jedi Vao free his sister.”

That made no sense. Kyra had been on the vanguard of the rebel fight until now, and best Jariah could recall, she didn’t even *know* the Vaos.

His confusion was plain. Shado said, “I spent too much time trying to solve strangers’ problems. I thought that was my job as a Jedi and even when I lost the Force I still tried. Even when I tried *not* to try...”

Deliah felt his self-loathing and spoke soft comfort. “Galaxy needs *some* willing heroes. They can’t all be reluctant ones like Cade.”

“The point is, I was always trying to fix big problems, and I neglected the only family member I have left.” His voice ached. “I need to set that right. If I can’t do that, I don’t deserve to have the Force at all.”

Jariah wanted to tell him that the Force wasn’t something you deserved, it was just something that happened to you, and everybody else nowadays. But even wearied and bitter, Shado was someone who needed clear right and wrong. And as far as Jariah was concerned, going all out to save somebody you loved was as about as right as could be. He could get behind that far more easily than the save-the-galaxy routine.

“I get where you’re coming from,” he told Shado, “But again, why *us*?”

“With everything else going on at Coruscant, they can’t spare extra personnel just to find Astraal,” Kyra said. “The most Stazi could get us was some speeder bikes to get around Galactic City while the other teams are doing their thing. That means this is a volunteer-only mission.... And right now, we’ve got just two volunteers.”

“So what, we’d hitch a ride on one of those shuttles, get dropped off, and run out on our own?”

“Yes,” said Shado. He was neither eager nor afraid. He just wanted to get started.

“What about Ania’s boat?” asked Deliah.

“I told Sauk to take *Free Agent* to Esseles,” Kyra said. “A-gee needs repairing and we only trust Guri and the Thrumble Foundation to do it right. He should be off soon.”

R2-D2 whistled eagerly as he rolled up to the group. Jariah patted his domed head. “Artoo here got a nice job there himself recently. You made the right choice.”

Kyra nodded seriously. Jariah could tell she’d wanted to get Sauk and AG-37 both someplace safe. She didn’t have the resignation of someone expecting to die, but she wasn’t expecting to live through what came next either. She was taking small solace in the fact that she’d protected two friends, if nobody else.

C-3PO, shuffling forward in his friend’s wake, cautioned, “This mission seems quite dangerous, and though I know you’ll never listen, I’d counsel you all against it. Why, the odds of success are...” He paused. “I lack data to calculate the odds, but I’m sure they’re quite unfavorable.”

Kyra gave a bittersweet smile and touched his golden shoulder. “The concern’s appreciated, but I already made up my mind. Besides, I don’t think you’ll be coming on this mission, so it’s not like *you* have to worry.”

“About myself, perhaps. But rest assured, Mistress Kyra, I will still worry about you and the others.”

Her eyes went soft. Jariah felt her clamp down on emotions before they could well out of control.

Kyra had made her choice, but Jariah hesitated. He wasn’t a fan of suicide missions. Even as miserable as he felt now, he liked living too much to run into something stupid. But then, he’d been running into stupid, suicidal battles with Cade for years. Staying with his brother during all those crazy risks had been what separated the Jariah he was now with what he might have been.

And, he thought sourly, he *had* missed a higher purpose.

“Ah, dammit,” he sighed angrily. “Karking Force. Karking Cade. Even when you quit us, we can’t quit you.”

Kyra looked confused, but Shado understood. “You don’t have to come, not if you don’t want to.”

He didn't want to, but he knew if he just walked away he'd feel like an absolute *sleemo*. Even that he might have dealt with, but not the certainty that he'd let down Cade, wherever Cade was right now.

"I'll help how I can," Jariah said, then glanced at Deliah. "Don't wanna speak for Blue."

He felt her reticence. Selflessness was not a Zeltron specialty, but it was just as hard for her to shirk the memory of Cade's reluctant heroism. Maybe harder; he sensed that all their intimate moments were preserved in memory and compounded by the Force. As Jariah felt her thoughts it seemed, just for a moment, like he was here with them. That they were a trio again.

"What the hell," Deliah sighed and looked back to *Mynock's* ruin. "I'll come with. We needed a ride anyway."



## Chapter Forty-Five

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Located near the Coreward end of the Namadii Corridor, which ran all the way from Coruscant to Bilbringi, Ord Mirit was a frequent stop-over for military ships travelling between the capital and the naval base. Though the permanent garrison was of only mild size, three to six star destroyers plus support craft could usually be found at the planet, undergoing maintenance and resupply. With its location, it could be easily reinforced by other ships patrolling the Namadii Corridor. However, the nearest Federation naval base was a good seven hours away for a standard Federation battle group.

It was, therefore, the perfect location for a hit-and-run.

Anj Dahl, tucked into her Crossfire, twisted to avoid collision with a corvette after dropping a volley of proton torpedoes into its aft shields. The energy screens held but were weakening, and another run or two might break them.

“All Rogues, form up on me,” she commanded. “We’re going to pound her until she breaks.”

Anj cut a wide curve and gave her pilots time to take formation behind her. As they did so, she checked her scanners to get a better grasp of the fight. Their instructions were to avoid attacks on large ships or defensive stations. The only targets were to be the small and vulnerable, such as this corvette. Ord Mirit’s orbital defense platforms had dispatched a full wing of TIE Predators, but they were currently being handled by an equal number of Crossfires and Twintails from *Paramount*. The carrier hung in the distance, beyond the edge of Ord Mirit’s gravity well and ready to run at any moment.

Deeper in, the planet's orbital spacedock sat vulnerable and tempting. Yes, it had powerful turbolaser batteries for defense, but those were geared toward capital ships, not snubfighters, and more importantly, it had not one but two *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers sitting in drydock, probably with only skeleton crews aboard. As she curved her fighter around and caught them with her bare eyes, Anj felt those things were just made for a pounding.

But she had her orders from General Sukharr and wouldn't countermand them. Stazi himself wasn't with them for this fight. He'd transferred his flag to a pretty, top-of-the-line MC-170 cruiser on loan from Slossar and was preparing for another hit-and-run, location unknown. In order to keep Chalk and Fenel from predicting his attacks, Stazi had split his fleet into seven different task forces, each with its own schedule to keep, and supposedly only Stazi himself knew what they were doing at any given time.

It was all organized chaos, the kind that had served them so well in war with Krayt. It was actually kind of exhilarating and made Anj want, all the more, to try on a run on those docked destroyers. It was, she thought, the kind of dare Stazi would have approved of, back in the day.

But she was a squad leader now and she had to handle the tasks assigned to her. As the other Rogues slipped behind her, Anj called, "Okay, gentles, prep two torpedoes, point-seven-second stagger between rounds."

She gave her pilots a few seconds to adjust their targeting settings, then swung them all toward the Federation corvette. It was spraying laserfire at them but without TIE cover it could only do so much. The Rogues slipped carefully around each barrage as they fell closer to the target.

"Lock on and get ready," Anj called. "Fire and break on my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark!"

She fired, broke and ran. Her other pilots did the same, but their double-wave of torpedoes flew true. The timing she'd arranged was perfect. The first volley impacted on the shields but the second went through the shuddering gap. They ripped open the corvette's midsection, spilling debris and superheated air into the vacuum. The ship's interior lights began to go out and a second round of explosions burst from its aft section.

Two thrusters winked out and the other two exploded, sending the dying corvette into a dizzying spin away from Ord Mirit.

It was just what she'd hoped for, and Anj joined her pilots in a victorious whoop. At the same time she called for them to form up again and checked her sensors for more targets.

Those two docked star destroyers were calling to her. She knew she could take at least one of them down if she tried. Anj was used to making calls based on instinct, but that knowledge came with absolute certainty beyond her past lucky guesses.

Sukharr would get mad. She could always apologize later. Anj opened a link to her pilots to give them their new orders.

And then her sensors lit up with incoming warships. To new star destroyers had left hyperspace outside Ord Mirit's orbit, almost halfway around the planet from *Paramount*. With desperate optimism, Anj calculated that they might have time for one concentrated attack on the shipyards before those destroyers got in firing range. Then a third red marker joined them, and her computer marked it as an interdicator cruiser.

"All ships, fall back immediately and jump to hyperspace!" said a voice from *Paramount*. "Retreat to the rendezvous point as soon as possible."

No brave raid today, then. Anj restrained her disappointment and swung her fighter's nose away from Ord Mirit. The rest of her pilots did the same without her having to tell them. She prepped her hyperdrives and input the proper course on the nav computer, then waited until she and her pilots were clear of the gravity well.

By her count, it all took ninety-three seconds. That drag ship would have its interdiction field up soon, but not soon enough.

"Rogues, we're clear," she called. "Let's cut and run."

Her fighter rocked, just a little, as starlines swept her off to hyperspace. That they'd missed the attack on the shipyard was disappointing- she'd been so sure it would work- but she could deal with that. They had a schedule to keep, and plenty more battles to fight.

It had been a long time since Shado had been to Coruscant, and it was clear a lot had changed. The constant flow of starships in and out of the capital world had been reduced to a controlled trickle, and the star destroyers hanging above the

planet seemed to him like daggers waiting to strike on the gleaming, trillion-person world.

Galactic City itself was protected from external threat by a raised shield dome. The two shuttles they'd borrowed from Admiral Yage had gotten past the orbital security cordon well enough, though everyone in Shado's ship had waited with held breath for one of Fenel's ships to mark them as intruders. Any attempt to get into Galactic City from the air would warrant even more scrutiny, and for that reason the two shuttles dropped low over the New Championne district south of the shield rim, where a landing zone had been prepared by the local resistance cell.

All during the descent into Coruscant's atmosphere, Shado had sat in the back of the cockpit, ignoring the eerily empty skies and focusing on the Force. After so long without it, he was having difficulty accessing its power again. That part of him had simply gone out of practice. So he closed his eyes stubbornly against the light, ignored the shuttle crew's nervous chatter, and tried to find his sister.

He had a feeling that even if he had been in-practice, it would have been hard. Something in the Force itself had changed. Coruscant had always had a unique presence; jam-packed with a trillion sentient life-forms but nearly bereft of plants or animals, it had seemed chaotic but with proper concentration you could filter out the noise and find the singular Force-signature you were looking for. Coruscant was still loud now, but there seemed a new unity to those trillion souls. Maybe it was the unusual situation the planet had been thrown into; maybe Cade's actions had truly caused a shift in the way the Force behaved. Maybe it was all in Shado's head.

He searched anyway, and as the shuttle flew a low pass over Galactic City en route to the landing zone, he tried to seek out minds apart from the unity. When he found Astraal he perceived her dimly at first and strained to focus. His eyes popped open and he moved to the front of the cockpit, shouldering past an anxious Jariah Syn. With his eyes and the Force, he located the place where his sister was located.

It was, not unexpectedly, the government palace.

"She's in there," he whispered to Jariah as the shuttle banked and the palace disappeared from view.

“You’re sure about that?”

Instead of answering, Shado closed his eyes again and tried to send a message to Astraal. It was simple: *I’m coming*. He didn’t know if it got through. All he could do was hope.

As the shuttle neared the landing zone, Shado retreated to the back of the cockpit and Jariah followed. He told the human, “I felt her. She’s in the palace. I don’t know where she is or what kind of shape... But she’s there and she’s alive.”

“Okay, great. That means all we’ve gotta do is break into the most secure compound in the whole fragging galaxy.”

Shado gave him a baleful look. “You volunteered for this.”

“Yeah, though I’m struggling to remember why right now.”

But Shado knew why, and so did Jariah. “There may be a way inside,” he said, “After that, I’ll have to use the Force to guide me to Astraal.”

“What kind of way?”

Before Shado could answer, the shuttle pilot announced they were coming in for landing. Shado and Jariah went to the shuttle’s aft hold, where dozens of Jedi and resistance soldiers were strapped into crash couches that lined the long cabin walls. In the center, held in place by taut, hard fibercables extended from ceiling and floor, were sets of compact Arakyd speeder bikes. None of them look new, but they would hopefully allow the teams to travel through the Coruscant underworld, beneath notice of the patrols to their targets in Galactic City.

And, Shado prayed, they’d get him to Astraal as well.

Once the shuttle set down, the large doors at the cabin’s aft swung down from their bottom hinge to become a ramp. They’d set down in an enclosed space, and when Shado joined the troops in filing onto its deck he found an old warehouse that had been repurposed into a hangar. From here they could begin deployment without being seen from overhead.

The troops got out quickly, and from there they began moving out the speeders. The big warehouse quickly felt packed with activity, and Shado hovered on the edge, feeling the nervous anticipation from so many others.

He was surprised how calm he felt. He knew where Astraal was and he had a pretty good idea of how to get there. Maybe he would succeed or maybe he’d fail, but at least he was on his

way. At least, after all this time, he was doing something that he was sure mattered.

Jariah stayed close to him, and Deliah and Kyra emerged from the crowd. Right behind them was the massive, leonine form of Rasi Tuum. Shado asked the Cathar Jedi, "You'll be going to the shield generator controls, won't you Master?"

"Correct," Tuum growled. "Have you felt your sister?"

"I have. She's somewhere inside the government palace."

"*E chu ta*," muttered Deliah. "Nothing like making it easy."

"Our *pateesa* says he knows a way in," Jariah said. "Hasn't told me where though."

"When the government zone was being rebuilt, they made a hidden tunnel connecting the Jedi temple headquarters and the palace." Shado looked to Tuum. "I hope it's still intact."

"When we left Coruscant we closed the tunnel from our side. Getting through the door will not be difficult." He tapped a claw on the lightsaber at his waist. "But Chalk may have destroyed the tunnel."

"What about the temple?" asked Jariah. "Has it just been sitting there the whole time, or did Chalk do something to it?"

"It has been sitting empty, or so Master Val says." Tuum tilted his head toward the four Imperial Knights, last of their kind, clustered on the far side of the hangar. Somehow they'd gotten red armor for this occasion and they stood out among the crowd. "But you must be cautious. Chalk's people likely installed sensors, perhaps traps."

"We'll be careful." Shado looked to Jariah, Deliah, Kyra. "All of us."

Nobody objected, which was all the assent he'd hoped for. The Zeltron said, "So aside from us four *koochoo chizka*, we've got teams going after the senators, the shield controls, and the broadcast center. What about Chalk himself? Shouldn't you all be going after the head guy?"

"Chalk's location is uncertain," said Tuum. "We don't even know he is on this planet."

"What, none of you could pick him up through the Force?"

She looked around the group, disappointed. Tuum shook his head. "None of us have been able to locate Chalk. But then, none of us knew him as well as Shado knows his sister."

Kyra, however, had her face screwed up in thought. Shado

asked, "Have you felt something? Anything at all?"

"I don't know," she said with a tiny sigh. "It's not Chalk. I've never even *met* him. But..."

"Eli," Jariah said simply.

"Maybe. I think he might be in the palace."

"Well, don't give him any heads-up we're coming, got it?"

"I know." She was still clearly torn. The only way for her to anticipate Eli was to reach out to him in the Force, but that would also alert him to their presence.

"For now you must focus on recovering Astraal Vao," said Tuum. "Even Eli Horn is not important. However, if you receive any hint as to Chalk's location, you must tell us."

"So you can drop everything and go rush the big guy?" asked Jariah, grinning.

Rasi Tuum simply nodded.

The sound of speeder-biked revving to life echoed through the hangar and drew attention from all corners. One team was getting ready to go; Shado spotted Master K'Kruhk among them, which meant it was the one bound for the senate.

"It is almost time," said Tuum. "I must be going. May the Force be with you all."

He snapped a short bow; Shado gave one in return. Then they parted ways. In that moment he felt like a Jedi again, sure of his purpose and the Force that guided him. It had been so long since he'd felt it, and after all he'd been through he didn't entirely trust the feeling, but it was nice to have.

Jariah slapped him on the shoulder, a little too hard, and gave a very Cade-like grin. "Come on, *pateesa*, no time to feel good. We got work to do."

Shado responded with a nod. This strange new Force was going to take some getting used to.

Eli sat in the darkness, cross-legged on the floor. In his upturned palm was a circular transceiver from which a shrunken blue image of the regent glowed.

"They're on Coruscant now. Kyra is with them." Eli's voice echoed faintly in the large chamber.

"Who else?" asked Chalk.

"I'm not sure. Possibly K'Kruhk." Weakly, honestly, he added, "I didn't know many Jedi well."

A sour snort. "Has Kyra reached out to you?"

"No. Should I reach out to her?"

"Wait until they've started their deployment, then allow yourself to be felt. When you're sure they've noticed you, do as we discussed."

"And you're sure it will draw the Jedi here?"

"If you do it correctly."

Eli wasn't in the mood for his derision. "I'll do what I can. I'm sure I'll be able to draw Kyra here at least."

"The more Jedi the better. You are the bait and also the trap."

"I know what I am," Eli said firmly. "What I agreed to be."

"Good. Contact me again when you have something more to tell me. I have a war to manage."

The holo shut off, plunging Eli into near-black. Still seated on the floor, he looked around him at the vast chamber. Originally a convocation hall deep inside the palace, it had been refitted for a singular purpose. Eli was the bait; when he made contact with Kyra again he'd send intimations in the Force to convince her that Chalk was in this location with him. That would bring the brunt of the Jedi assault down on top of him, but this room was the trap.

Though it was dark here, glowlamps attached to rifle-barrels cast light that gleamed across face-masks, shoulder-pads, and plasteel forearms. Nearly one hundred and fifty stormtroopers were packed into this chamber, all fully-armed, with several manning mounted weapon emplacements. Another fifty war droids had joined them. None of them could be felt in the Force; the last ysalamiri in Chalk's possession had been spread around the room, encasing it in a Force-blind bubble except for the pool in the center where Eli sat in meditation. Though he was surrounded, he felt acutely alone.

There was more to the trap than one room. The surrounding corridors, even ones that passed above and below, had been lined with detonation charges. Once the Jedi got close enough their escape routes would all be collapsed. The troopers and the droids, protected from the Force, would surround the Jedi, rob them of their powers, and slaughter them without mercy.

Chalk had insisted it was the only way to stop the Jedi from collapsing the Alliance and dropping the Federation into yet another war. Rationally, Eli had weighed his argument and



found nothing to counter it.

Despite that, the plan made him feel sick.

As he waited, he took Darth Talon's lightsaber in his hands. No, not Darth, just Talon. He was still getting used to that. When he'd decided the galaxy had to be freed from the Force he'd left his original lightsaber with Kyra, praying that he'd never have to battle or take life again. That had been naïve. He'd killed again and again in service of- or partnership with- Hogrum Chalk. He would lead K'Kruhk- wise, ancient, generous- to his death. He might kill Kyra himself. This slaughter would be his to own, and he'd have to own it, because it was the only way left to limit the Force's iron clasp on the galaxy. He couldn't stop the Force, but he could weaken it a little. He hoped that meant something.

Eli clung to the lightsaber like a talisman. This, he thought, was the final proof that what he'd done was right. Losing the Force had freed even Talon from the grip of Sith teachings. It had allowed her to become better than she was.

It had allowed her to be killed, by him.

There was a lot more killing to be done. Eli prayed he had the stomach for it. The good of the galaxy was depending on it. He clasped Talon's saber tight, wringing both hands on hard metal, and waited.

Through decades of political upheaval and military strife, the shipyards of Kuat had remained untouched. The construction complex itself, one thick durasteel ring stretched around the waist of a verdant garden-world, was protected by further layers of mobile weapon platforms, sensor readouts, and even carefully-laid minefields. Kuat's defenses were as potent as those of any naval complex in the galaxy, and all of it was financed not by Federation funds but the immense, private coffers of Kuat Drive Yards itself.

Taking it was nigh-impossible, so it was good Gar Stazi had smaller ambitions today. He wouldn't call his plans humble; indeed, he felt powerful and even a little vain as he stood on the bridge of the cruiser *Inviolable*. The MC-170 *Scythe*-class warship was almost as massive as a *Pellaeon*-class destroyer and just as deadly. Formerly a task force flagship in Admiral Slossar's fleet, the good Sluissi had loaned the top-of-the-line

warship to Stazi. It reminded him not of his old star destroyer *Alliance* but of *Indomitable*, the cruiser with which he and his late friend Jaius Yorub had waged guerilla war on Krayt for seven years. This would seem just like old times, but in those days they'd never dared an attack on Kuat.

He'd never publicly admit to liking war, and in truth he found little joy in it, but Stazi had to admit he'd missed these thrills.

There was no way they could get to the shipyards themselves, but Stazi was content to use *Inviolable* and its support ships to nip away at the turbolaser stations strewn on the outer edges of the system. His forces ganged up on each station one by one, overwhelming and destroying them while taking minimal losses.

Stazi had been monitoring the news-nets and they were, of course, abuzz. His fleets, with Slossar's help, had launched a half-dozen raids on military targets galaxy-wide. The Federation News Bureau and independent outlets were all confusion and panic. Most repeated the statement Chalk had already issued, deploring these savage attacks by the murderer Gar Stazi and his terrorist band. A few outlets were betraying their latent Alliance sympathies by noting that the rebels had attacked no civilians, and there was no proof of their complicity in the bombing of the Imperial Knights.

Stazi couldn't allow himself to be distracted by public relations. Those were important, but he'd already discovered that he was no master politician. He excelled when fighting, and as the station in front of *Inviolable* turned to a superheated ball of scrap, he basked in the cheers of his crew.

As they started toward the next target *Inviolable*'s Captain Rou, a meter-tall Alanteen who made up for his size with restless energy, declared, "Admiral, three star destroyers have just entered the system."

He glanced at the tactical holo and felt himself sober. Those destroyers dropped out of hyperspace on an entry vector that didn't match any he'd expected. Likely they'd staged outside the system first, then dropped in at close range to take him by surprise. They hadn't brought an interdictor cruiser, though, which meant *Inviolable* would still be able to escape.

"All ships, prepare to retreat," Stazi said. "Comm, patch me in with that lead star destroyer if you can."

As the crew got to work, Stazi hunched over the comm station and waited. The support ships moved faster than his heavy cruiser and were already set to jump to lightspeed. As he gave the order for them to go ahead, the comm officer reported, "Sir, we have a link. Captain Mingo Bovark of the *Carida Fire*."

Stazi knew the Nimbanel captain and even liked him; or at least he had, until being shot and arrested by him on Bakura. When the link opened the familiar jowled face appeared, and Bovark's big black eyes went wider in surprise.

"Greetings Captain," Stazi said smoothly, aware those destroyers were minutes from firing range. "I take it you weren't expecting to encounter me personally."

"I was called to respond to a disturbance." Bovark's whiskers twitched. "I didn't know you'd be making it, though I should have guessed."

"Then it's been a pleasure to surprise you. I'm happy it's you this time, Captain. I've always thought you were more reasonable than those hardheaded humans who usually command star destroyers."

Bovark wasn't in the mood for banter. "Stazi, these attacks are barely damaging our bases. All you're doing is burning your resources on pointless feints. You'll exhaust yourselves before you exhaust us."

"You think that's my plan? You know me better than that."

"I know you're not a fool. Even with Slossar helping you, all you'll do is tear the Federation apart. And for what? So you could play hero again? I know there's more to it than that."

It was a blatant ploy to delay Stazi's escape. He didn't take it. "What I'm doing is *right*, Captain. Hogrum Chalk lied, cheated, and murdered his way to that throne, and soon all the galaxy will know it."

"Admiral—"

"I'm so glad to hear you recognize my authority, *Captain*." Stazi grinned fiercely. "When we next meet, I hope you'll have reconsidered what side you belong on."

He stabbed the comm console, closing the link himself, then turned to the helm station. "Lightspeed! Now!"

His crew was standing by. The stars outside the viewport exploded into the beautiful swirl of escape. Stazi exhaled with relief, but his blood and adrenaline were still pounding.

He couldn't lie. He *did* enjoy this. But their next target would be even harder to attack than Kuat, and that meant he had to calm himself and prepare.

And, most of all, he had to hope the insertion on Coruscant had gone well. It was up to others to ensure his boast to Bovark wouldn't become a lie.

"I've Stazi credit," muttered Gunner. "He doesn't lack for boldness."

"You should have figured that out long before now," her father said.

He shut off the holo-image through which they'd been watching the engagement at Kuat from Rulf's cabin on *War Hammer*. The chamber went dark; faint stars drifted in the blackness beyond the viewport. "Still," he said, "It's not a campaign. Just a very large-scale act of harassment."

"It's working. He's got Fennel and Jaeger flinging around ships, trying to anticipate his attacks. Usually wrongly." Gunner had to admit she'd been impressed when one of the rebel attack groups had withdrawn from its feint at Ord Trasi... only to jump back into the system one hour later to catch it in the middle of post-battle clean-up.

Yet her father was right. There was no way Stazi could actually win a war like this. "He told you he's sending operatives to Coruscant?" she asked.

"I presume to convince the senate."

She eyed him, reminding without words that he'd pledged to intervene if and only if the senators rejected Chalk. He looked away from her and sighed. "Do you want to join a war so much, Gunner?"

"I want to end one. I also don't want to end up part of some three-ship fleet with no allies and no point. I'm not being idealistic father, I'm being practical. We're soldiers and there's a war. If we don't pick an ally soon, *everyone* will become our enemy."

He looked out the viewport at the empty starfield. They'd taken themselves away from Zonama Sekot and waited in deep space in the Mid Rim, just off the Corellian Run. There were a lot of skirmishes going on across the galaxy right now, but none near them.

Yet if her father decided to act, they could do so quickly.

She asked him, "Do you think that attack at Kuat was Stazi?"

"Perhaps. It seemed... appropriately bold."

"If he's in the Core he'll strike another big target next. Corellia. Anaxes. Maybe even Coruscant itself. Do we know where Fenel is right now?"

Though *War Hammer* had been cut off from all secure naval communications lines, Rulf was monitoring enough civilian and poorly-secured military channels to get a picture of things. "I believe he's at Anaxes. Chalk might not want him far from Coruscant."

Gunner let her father contemplate his own words. She could feel his indecision, and his emotions came to her so clearly she couldn't hold them against him. Despite all their disagreements over the years she recognized the professional honor her father clung to, and she respected his hesitation to fan the flames of this new war.

But in the end she could sense his conflict inch toward resolution, and she was unsurprised when he turned to her and said, "I'll order helm to take us Coreward. It's quite a trip, and a lot could happen in that time."

"We'll just have to keep monitoring the situation."

"Indeed," Rulf said.

He gave no sign of pleasure as he turned to his comm system and passed his order to the bridge crew. Despite that, Gunner felt a flush of pride and let a smile turn her lips. Her father, in mid-conversation with the helm chief, glanced back at her, but by then she'd already wiped it away.

## Chapter Forty-Six

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The sky over Coruscant was empty. The seemingly-perpetual intersecting lines of speeder traffic were gone and so were the shuttles tracing high arcs overhead. Only faint glow from high-altitude patrol ships made light in the starless twilight. The white noise of a million repulsors and burning thrusters, Galactic City's audial constant, was thunderous in its absence.

The scene was surreal, and it seemed to Saara like a perfect match for what was inside her. As she rode on the back of a speeder bike, directing its pilot through the narrow undercity chasms that mazed beneath the government district, she possessed the same empty, ominous quiet inside her. It was the calm waiting for a storm.

K'Kruhk, who rose several speeders behind her as their formation slinked carefully and steadily through the maze, had taught her calming methods before leaving *Paramount*. The old Jedi Master had betrayed no surprise when she'd told him what she was. She was totally honest with him as she confessed, as she had been with Porat, and like her husband, K'Kruhk was startling in his capacity for forgiveness. She'd begged his help in shutting out the Force; instead he'd offered to teach her Jedi techniques to contain her dangerous passions. They'd spent hours in privacy and he'd shown her methods the Sith had never bothered to teach.

Either he was using the Force to fool her, which was always possible, or he really did trust her.

K'Kruhk had taught her to focus on inner peace without pushing away the Force. As she calmed herself, the Force

around her calmed. She no longer felt crowded by black powers begging to be used. Saaraï prayed it lasted.

The Jedi Master had given her something else too, which she clung to even tighter. It wasn't wisdom or advice or even a suggestion. It was merely a musing. K'Kruhk had explained to her that, according to Cade Skywalker, the Force as they knew it was just one layer of a greater whole. For as long as there had been Jedi and Sith, they'd touched it through the Living Force, the invisible power that bound all life. There was a greater layer called the Cosmic, in which the ascended Whills held sway. The Cosmic had a limited influence over the Living, and as Skywalker had described it, the Whills themselves were divided in perfect and opposing halves, product of an ancient schism.

The sides, of course, were what Jedi and Sith called light and dark. It was common among both Force-using schools to talk about each valence having a strength, a pull, even a will. When Jedi talked about falling they often spoke of the dark side as a conscious tempter; in the same way, Sith called the light beguiling. If Skywalker's theory held true, then the valence in the Living Force was rooted in the Cosmic, and so was the suffocating pull of light and dark.

But now- another supposition, based on scattered conversations with those passed beyond- the Force they drew on might not have been suffused with the power of the Cosmic. If what they shared now was the so-called Unifying Force, then the old valences may no longer apply. The dark may no longer tempt, nor the light beguile. There may not even be light or dark at all.

It was such a beautiful hope; Saaraï had revolted from it. Some beings, she'd told K'Kruhk, could embrace darkness on their own. So, too, would a rare handful become spotless saints. This, he allowed, was true; the Force found what was within you and made it manifest without, and inside the heart of every being there was a mixture of light and dark, good and evil. As long as sentience existed, that would never change.

But, the ancient Jedi had supposed, the valences might no longer have such pull. Perhaps now it would be easier for a Force-user to stay in the middle, without being compelled to turn either saint or devil.

Perhaps that was what the timeless prophecy had meant when it talked about the Chosen One bringing balance to the Force.

But for now all that was abstract supposition, and Saaraï tried not to be swallowed by possibilities. She had to focus on what lay ahead of her, and there was plenty to be concerned about.

The senatorial residence complex was three high towers, linked at several places by reinforced walkways. The cityscape around the buildings had been cleared and Saaraï's bike came to a rest at an alley mouth looking across a span of open space to the base of the nearest tower. It soared a mile above them, and when she craned her head back she could see over a dozen airspeeders flying slow patrols around the higher levels. Their spotlights traced slowly over the towers' curving sides, as though peering into windows. From this angle Saaraï couldn't spot the apartment where she and Porat had lived, but just being here, looking up at the tower, brought back memories. They were sharp, vivid, and painful. It took effort to still her heart.

Another speeder pulled gently alongside hers. Ganner Krieg was at the controls, Azlyn Rae in the passenger seat. Saaraï wasn't sure where they'd gotten the scarlet Imperial Knights' armor they now wore, but they seemed more confident in their old clothes.

As Ganner brought their bike with a meter of Saaraï's, Azlyn scanned the sky. "I don't like this," she said. "They could spot us at any time."

"We should kill our lights," said Ganner as he did just that.

Saaraï looked back and saw the snaking line of bikes behind them shut off their forward glowlamps. They instantly disappeared into the shadowed canyon in which they waited, but they'd become more visible when they went in toward the tower.

Azlyn took out her binoculars and looked at the tower's base. "Do you see the way in from here?"

"I think so."

Saaraï took out her own binoculars to scan the structure. When she and Porat had made their hasty flight from here three years back, they'd ridden a maintenance lift down to a low level and escaped via a speeder placed in reserve near the mouth of a large exhaust vent. The climate control system for



the tower was massive and complex, given the varied needs of the species it hosted. She spotted the round mouth of the vent and the cross-hatched metal grate erected in front of it. That was new, but nothing a few lightsabers wouldn't take care of.

"I see it," she confirmed. "No sensor traps, not that I can spot. We're going to need to cut through, though."

"That won't be hard," said a voice behind her, and she saw Asaak Dan nudge his speeder closer. The Togruta's bright-pink skin made him stand out in the gloom. "It might get us unwanted attention though."

"That was my thought."

"Then it sounds like you need a distraction."

Saarai felt his confidence, but Ganner warned, "They'll be on high alert. You could drag a dozen ships after you."

"Isn't that the idea? I know my way around the lower levels too. I can lose them." Asaak twisted in his seat and told someone further back, "I can do this, with your permission."

Deeper in darkness, K'Kruhk said, "It appears to be the only way. Be careful, Master Dan."

"I was going to say the same to you. I'll give you a signal before I make a run at them."

*So damned brave*, Saarai thought as the Jedi kicked his bike upward, swung it around, and zipped into the dark canyon. Sith could be brave too, but not self-sacrificing like that.

As they waited for Asaak to stage his distraction, Saarai risked touching the Force herself. She didn't try to use it, merely feel it, and she could sense those around her without raising her inner dark. Azlyn was focused, Ganner tense. K'Kruhk was thinking of how they'd deal with the senators once they got inside. Further back she could feel the presence she'd marked as Monia Gahan's. The Mon Cal was running through her own mental rehearsals, wondering which of her senatorial colleagues would welcome her back and which would see her as a traitor.

Saarai mostly wondered how they'd react to Marasiah's last message. She still hadn't seen it herself.

When Asaak contacted them, he did it through the Force. Saarai felt it clearly as a short burst of confidence.

Then he made his move. Coming from an angle halfway on the other side of the skyscraper, his bike veered toward the

tower without directly interfering with the security cordon. It was still enough to draw attention from several speeders, and when they started veering toward him, Asaak began juking wildly and shooting laser bolts wildly into the air. Nothing came close to hitting a target; Saaraï guessed he was simulating a drunken joyrider.

The bolts were enough to draw more speeders after him. As he started to flee, a straight fast dash toward the undercity, Azlyn and Ganner soared ahead. Saaraï followed, and then the other bikes. They kept their forward lights off but there was just enough twilight in the sky for them to spot the exhaust vent with their naked eyes. The port's rim was about three meters in diameter, which allowed plenty of room for the bikes to pass through once the two Knights quickly cleaved a hole in the exterior grate with nimble lightsaber-slashes.

After that, they all went in single-file. The gas coming out of the exhaust vent was hot and noxious, and Saaraï had warned the others to bring respirator masks. She affixed hers tight to her face and breathed cool oxygen while heat itched her blue skin.

On her signal, they rode the first shaft they could out of the exhaust vent and into the tower's interior. They reached a mostly-empty storage chamber with breathable atmosphere where they could dismount from their bikes and prepare for further entry. They were a dozen total, mixing Jedi, Imperial Knights, and resistance commandos. Monia and Saaraï, ostensibly politicians, seemed the odd ones out.

A Bothan scout named Gresk checked his rifle, sniffed the air, and asked, "Where to now?"

"There's an auxiliary station where we can access the internal comm system for all three skyscrapers," Saaraï told them. "From there, we can pump out Marasiah's message and make sure they'll hear it. But it's about fifteen levels up."

"Tell me there's a lift," said Ganner.

"Yes, but if we use it we might alert somebody to our presence. We'll do what Porat and I did to escape. We'll use the shaft."

She led them through several maintenance corridors, all empty, to the industrial-grade service lift. Instead of calling the car, Ganner and Azlyn hacked through the doors, allowing

them to look up and down on the vertiginous, pitch-black transit tube.

Gresk shone his barrel-mounted glowlamp on the shaft's curving walls. "I don't see any auxiliary ladders. How do we get up?"

"We brought fiberchord cables," said Azlyn, slapping the reel gun on her hip. "Look. You can see there's ribbing at each floor with enough space to get purchase on. We can go up one level at a time."

"And hope nobody calls the car down on our heads," added Ganner.

As Gresk's light flashed across the shaft, something caught Saarai's attention. She took out her own smaller glowlamp and examined a line of bunched cables running up and down the shaft, affixed to the opposite side by magnetic clamps at regular intervals. She didn't know their purpose and was almost certain that they hadn't been here during her and Porat's escape; the horrible night was stamped in her memory as the point where everything had gone wrong, preserved and vivid. Any number of changes could have been done to this building in three years, but they nagged at her.

Ganner sensed her disquiet. "What's wrong?"

"You see those cables?" She flashed her light on them. "Those are new. They weren't here last time."

"That was a long time ago," Monia told her. "Are you sure?"

"Look at the walls. Smooth and curved. I remember being surprised there was no mechanical clutter in this shaft."

"So there's clutter now," said Azlyn. "Is this really something we have to worry about?"

"I don't know. I'm just getting... a feeling."

It felt strange to admit that to herself. The others looked at her curiously, probably wondering if she was showing nascent Force skills. K'Kruhk had promised to keep her secret for now, and when she looked at the Whiphid he gave her a single nod.

"These may be worth investigating," he said. "But it shouldn't slow our progress."

"All right," said Ganner. "I'll do it."

Azlyn put a hand on his arm. "We might need your help up there."

"I trust you can take care of it." He smiled softly. "Let me take care of this."

She nodded reluctantly and let him go. It was easier to descend than rise with the fibercable, and Ganner affixed his magnetic grapples to the interior of the doorframe before dropping down, using the Force to ease his passage. That left the others to stand precariously in that threshold, aim their grappling guns higher, and begin the awkward ascent.

They progressed more quickly than Saara had expected. She could feel K'Kruhk and Azlyn using the Force to help themselves and others, and they progressed one floor at a time, pulling themselves up to the ledge on the bottom of each door before standing on it and using the cable to reel themselves to the next level. A wrong step might have doomed any of them to a deadly plunge but they worked calmly, smoothly, in shocking sync. Saara started to wonder if their actions weren't being naturally coordinated through the Force, without even K'Kruhk's help.

When they reached the proper floor, Azlyn cut a smaller hole through that door and let them through. Saara was less familiar with this area and had to rely on small guideposts mounted at intersections of gray hallways. This was still an area used by maintenance staff, utilitarian and plain, unvisited by resident senators. All the while she reached out with the Force, seeking other minds ahead of them.

They were almost at their destination when she felt one. Spinning to K'Kruhk and Azlyn she whispered, "There's someone ahead. I think they're in the comm center"

Azlyn's eyes widened at her perceptiveness, but K'Kruhk said, "We will handle it. Please, wait here."

The two of them stepped forward, leaving Saara with Monia and the others in the hall. Through the Force she could feel them creep up on the comm center and sense those inside. Then she felt them tear apart the door and charge inside. Her heart pounded fast, anticipating lightsaber thrusts, tangling laserfire, the black thrill of combat and pain of death. It roused old, dangerous feelings in her, and she could only retreat from them with effort.

In her struggle for self-control, Saara barely noticed that there was no violence, no death. When K'Kruhk came back

into view he wordlessly beckoned with one clawed hand, and the others followed.

The comm room was a circular chamber too small for all twelve of them to stand inside, especially when the chair near the main console already held the slumped body of a crewman. Saaraï saw no marks on his body at all, and his chest rose and fell steadily. He looked like a man napping on the job. These Jedi had given him a more kind and temporary sleep than a Sith would have.

Azlyn nudged the man and his chair aside and bent over the console. As she scanned the controls she removed a circular message disc from her belt. Saaraï stepped in beside her and quickly programmed the system up to broadcast to the personal comm units of every senatorial apartment in all three towers.

"All right," she said, stepping back. "It's good to go."

Azlyn eyed her. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. They'll receive it as an emergency notification. Even if they're asleep they'll be woken up to hear it."

"Well, I guess that's a good way to get their attention."

Azlyn held the message disc in her palm and stared at it. It was the last testimony from her empress, and the last mission she'd ever do as an Imperial Knight. With a heavy heart, she put the disc into the reader and tapped the button to transmit.

Everyone, even Saaraï, jumped back when a holo appeared over the console. Glowing blue letters read STAND BY FOR EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION and a hard electric voice repeated those words five times over. Apparently they were getting treated to a playback of their message as it went out.

Once the initial shock died, everyone in the room edged closer to see what came next. When the opening declaration ended, its big letters disappeared and were replaced by a head-and-shoulders shot of Marasiah Fel. Without the white streak in her hair she lacked the regal visage the senators would have expected. Nonetheless, the recording carried the hard conviction in her voice and the intensity of her stare.

"To all who would listen," she said, "I am Marasiah Fel, rightful empress and head of state of the Galactic Federation. I regret that I can't speak the truth to you in person, but I will do it now.

"What you have been told for the past three years is a lie. I

was not murdered in my quarters on Coruscant but imprisoned by my uncle, Hogrum Chalk. He staged my death as a pretext for purging his enemies after taking power. Admiral Gar Stazi, Senator Nelloran, Senator Kaige, and Senator Derrol were all innocent of the crimes they were tried for.

“My uncle saw to it that they’d be convicted. He not only staged my death but manipulated Alliance partisans into attacking Galactic City. In this way, he forced the Alliance-supporting senators, including Speaker Brighton, to side with him. As a final act of calculated mass murder, he lay siege to Admiral Jhoram Bey’s fleet and slaughtered it. The attacking force, under command of Edouard Fenel, was ordered to refuse all calls to surrender and destroy all ships. Even escape pods were destroyed with all crew inside.

“I know this because I was there. I was liberated by friends and tracked to Admiral Bey’s fleet, and I escaped only with the help of the Force. My uncle made me accessory to his war crimes, and that is just one more action for which he must be held accountable.

“I know you have many questions. I cannot answer them all. By the time you see this message I will be one with the Force. But I will answer the ones that seem most pressing.

“I did not try to reclaim my throne these past three years for many reasons. Most are personal and I will not address them. But I will also say this. The Galactic Federation does not need me. It doesn’t need any regent. Reliance on one leader, or three, to bind together the Federation only weakens its other institutions. If the Federation deserves to prosper it will do so based on the desire and cooperation of all its members, be they Alliance or Imperial.

“I would give guidance to both now. To Senator Brighton and those who embrace Alliance ideals, I respect your strength, and more I respect the sheer number of systems you represent. It is right that the former Alliance take the lead in building this new Federation, but do not grow haughty with your majority. Galactic peace requires partnerships between factions. Peace, and democracy you treasure, will only survive through collective restraint.

“To Senator Eldon and the Imperial cohort, I urge you not to let your pride break you. Jagged and Davek Fel created the Fel

dynasty because they recognized the Empire needed to change. They adapted it to a new galaxy and made it strong and prosperous by working together with other, not by walling it off in misaimed nostalgia for a Sith Lord's brutal reign. Only by changing can you flourish, and I pray you do so now.

"And to the military, and all the captains and admirals who so bravely served under my father, I urge you to be protectors of the peace, not instigators of war. Your purpose is to serve the galaxy's people, not force your will on them, even if you believe it is for their own good.

"And finally, to all the Jedi and Imperial Knights who have lost the Force... I hope you will have regained it by the time you see this message. The galaxy will rely on you more than anyone. Your wisdom will guide them all through the time ahead. Please, don't let the temptations of authority scar your judgement. Remain committed to the light in the Force, even as the Force becomes bigger than ever. The virtue of others will spring from you. The future of the galaxy is in your hands now.

"That is my final statement. I've made many mistakes in my life, but here, at the end, I'm making the best choice I can." So firm until now, Marasiah's voice finally wavered. "I hope I will be remembered for that. Thank you and goodbye... And may the Force be with us all."

The holo winked out so suddenly a few people in the comm center jumped again, but Saara stayed still. She looked into the blank space where the holo had been and felt the Force with them, all around them, deep and strong and waiting to be used.

During their year-long journey in search of Khat Lah, Lowbacca had told them how Coruscant's Jedi Temple had been a recreation, as accurate as possible, of the one used during the Order's glory days in the Old Republic. The Sith had set up shop for a while, giving it a decidedly sinister makeover, and since Krayt's death the Jedi had expended a lot of resources in returning it to the temple its original elegance, itself a copy of even older splendor.

Nobody seemed to have touched the place in the last few years. The air was thick and stuffy, the hallways dark and the floor-tiles thick with dust. The corridors were still grand high things and at this nighttime hour only a dim light fell through

the window. It wasn't enough to chase away the darkness that seemed to gather in corners, around high ceilings, and at the end of long halls. The only sound at all was their footsteps and breathing, tiny things that didn't come close to filling the brooding emptiness.

Frankly, it was giving Jariah the creeps.

Shado was the only one of them who knew his way around this place, and he led them unerringly deep inside. There seemed to be no running power in this place at all, so instead of using lifts to access the lower levels Shado found them an old-fashioned spiral staircase which they followed for a dizzying many-levelled descent.

All the while, nobody spoke. They were all listening and all reaching out with the Force.

Jariah couldn't feel much aside from the three beings beside him. Shado was singularly intent on getting to his sister. Deliah was wondering why she'd signed up for this. Kyra's thoughts were reaching elsewhere. Beyond them there he felt only a vague anxiety, the collective worry of a trillion-person capital.

At the bottom of the staircase the corridors were narrower and pitch-black. As proof of how abandoned this place was, every motion kicked up a thin curtain of dust that winked in the harsh white of their glowlamps. Shado knew where he was going, still, and he led them down several more corridors until they reached a sudden dead end.

"This the place?" asked Jariah, glow-lamp on the wall in front of him. He could tell from the welded seams and off-color metal that this had been a relatively recent addition.

"Yes it is," said Shado.

He nodded to Kyra, and both of them ignited lightsabers. They made quick work of the wall, with two horizontal slashes and two vertical ones. With the Force they moved the cut-out portion gently aside, then flashed their lights into the corridor beyond. It was long, straight, narrow, and just as derelict as the ones they'd passed through.

"So this is the link to the palace?" asked Deliah.

"That's right," Shado said.

"Well. Doesn't look like anybody's used it."

"They might still have guards and sensors on the other end."

Shado shut off his lightsaber and aimed his glowlamp ahead.



"That's why we'll be careful."

"Can you still feel your sister?" Kyra asked.

"I can." He looked at her while keeping his light ahead.

"What can *you* feel?"

Kyra gnawed her lower lip. "I think Eli's here. And I think he's in the palace."

"Tell me you didn't give him a heads-up," said Deliah.

"I don't know. Not consciously."

"Well if you can sense him, can't he sense you?"

"I don't *know*," she repeated in frustration. "There's something.... Odd about him. In the Force."

Her hesitation was plain. Shado said, "I'm going to get Astraal. No matter what."

"I know," she said. "And I'll come with you. I just wish I had a better idea what's ahead."

Shado closed his eyes. Jariah could feel him stretch out with the Force. "The palace ahead... it feels empty. Not totally hollow, but not like it should."

"Probably not a lot of day staff there when Chalk called martial law," Deliah reasoned. "Plus all that security's probably out in the city, keeping lockdown."

"That would make it easy," Jariah muttered, expecting no such thing.

"Either way, we go ahead," Shado said.

He took the first unerring steps down the hall. The other three lingered behind him for a second, each hesitating for a different reason. Then all three followed him deeper into the dark.

Of all the targets that would need to be taken today, the Federation News Bureau headquarters was, undoubtedly, the easiest to secure. Jao could tell that much as he parked his speeder bike against an adjacent tower and scanned the main entrance pad with his binoculars. There were no security speeders flying loops around the building and no cordon warding off access. The FNB was still allowed the broadcast during lockdown, but they were giving out only confused reports with the limited information the government was feeding them. With the capital locked in stasis and the big battles going on elsewhere, the news service had been rendered irrelevant. For now, anyway.

Only four stormtroopers were posted to guard the entrance. Jao tried to reach beyond the doors with the Force and find more, but he felt only a vague mass of life, anxious and confused like most of Coruscant was this night.

Seeking clarity, he looked to the man whose bike hovered beside his. After lowering his own binoculars, Yalta Val said, "I think a frontal entrance is best."

"Those stormtroopers might have backup inside."

"Backup for what? We're just two Imperial Knights on official business. They'll have no reason to stop us."

Val had already suggested that plan, and Jao was still skeptical. "What if these are Chalk's special troops, the ones who really know what's going on?"

"If they were so special I doubt he'd have set them to guard this place."

He had a point. "Anything from the other teams?"

"Now on the comm, not on the Force." Val smiled lightly. "Forget about them. Focus on the problem in front of you and solve it in the easiest way. Be confident and the Force will flow around you and give you what you need."

After all they'd been through it was like they were master and apprentice again. Jao liked that feeling; it was comfortable when everything else was in flux. Val leaned forward and put both hands on the bike's throttles. Jao did the same, and when his old teacher gunned the engine and leaped ahead, Jao was right behind him.

They cut a casual curve toward the landing pad with forward lights stabbing into the night. There was no effort to hide their approach and Jao could feel the four stormtroopers on the pad tense as the bikes set down to land.

They dismounted casually, confidently. The lead trooper approached with rifle dangling from his side, palm on its butt. Three lingering behind him, weapons gripped in both hands but not yet raised. The leader snapped a salute and said, "Master Knights, it's a pleasure to see you, sirs. We'd heard none of you had survived."

So far, so good. Val told him, "We were fortunate not to be at the training center when the terrorists attacked."

"That's good to hear, sir. What is your business here?"

"We carry an urgent message for the FNB chair."

"I see. We weren't informed of your arrival, sir."

"Perhaps there was a mix-up." Jao felt Val give a touch of Force-suggestion. "We came on short notice."

"I understand, sir. If you wait one moment, I'll double-check for those orders."

"There's no need for that," Val insisted more firmly. "Let us pass. Our mission is time-critical."

Jao felt the leader succumb to Val's suggestion, but the three behind him were more suspicious. He reached out to those troopers in the Force, soothing them, convincing them that everything was as it should be. As he felt their suspicion waver his own confidence grew, and with it his strength in the Force. It had been a long time since he'd done something like this.

Jao glowed with satisfaction as the troopers stepped aside and the leader said, "Go right ahead, sir. Do you need an escort?"

"It's all right, trooper, we know the way," Val smiled and moved hurriedly past.

As they stepped across the pad and through the main doors Jao asked, "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure. I don't *actually* know the way. I just wanted them off our backs."

They found the broad lobby deserted except for a reception desk in the center where a single young Snivvian sat. When he saw the two Knights approach he shot to his feet, big nostrils twitching, and said, "Sirs! We, ah, didn't know you were coming. Or *anyone* was coming. The whole building's been on lockdown and we haven't even had a chance to go *home*. I'm been on shift for so long I had to sleep under my... Never mind."

Jao had a feeling this one wouldn't be a problem. "Is the FNB chair in the office?"

The Snivvian blinked twice, then said, "No. He was on Brentaal when this all started. He's stuck there, I think, not that they tell *me* anything."

"The chief of operations, then."

"Oh. Yes. I think she's in her office. I don't know if she'll be awake, but, ah, I can call and see." He reached for his communications board and paused. "Who should I say is asking for her?"

“Friends from on high,” Val smiled gently. “We’ve come to discuss her programming schedule.”

With shaking hands and twitching nostrils, the Snivvian made the call. Jao felt Val’s confidence in the Force. It was in perfect harmony with his own and they amplified each other. After so long without the Force it was unequivocally back with him, as strong and strengthening as ever. This was the kind of feeling he’d craved for so long.

The only taint was who he’d lost to get it.

After using the emergency broadcast network to share Marasiah’s last message with the senators, they still had the tricky job of actually talking to them. From the auxiliary communications room, Saaraï was able to place personalized calls to nearly twenty senatorial apartments. She and Monia had come up with the list of important persons together, and once contact was established Monia had convinced them to convene in one of the modest gathering halls located deep inside the first tower.

That was a risk, but a necessary one. If any of the enlisted senators decided to contact security, Saaraï and her group would quickly find themselves on the run. Yet none of them did. When they joined the twenty senators in the gathering hall, a circular chamber currently empty of furniture or decoration, she could feel the curiosity emanating from all of them, even the firmly Imperial senators like Bastion’s Eldon and Ord Pardon’s Yantel.

Curiosity was compounded by surprise when Saaraï followed Monia into the room. Next came Azlyn and then K’Kruhk; the scarlet Imperial armor and dowdy Jedi robes created new shock. On K’Kruhk’s order, the resistance commandos had stationed themselves outside the room, both to keep a lookout and to keep from frightening the senators.

Senator Yantel, a dark-haired young firebrand, emanated suspicion when he looked at Saaraï. “You are Senator Derrol’s wife, aren’t you? I’d thought you killed with the other rebels.”

She didn’t give in to her anger or rise to bait. “Porat was killed during the massacre of Admiral Bey’s fleet. I was lucky to survive.”

“I’m very interested to hear a full account of that battle,” said

Senator Rey'lya. The auburn-furred Bothan liked to play mediator in Alliance-Imperial conflicts, and Saaraï could feel her eagerness to get involved here.

"Admiral Fenel might give one, if he can be compelled to," said Azlyn.

"Well, right now he'd busy fighting off attacks by *your* Admiral Stazi." Yantel glared at Monia. "How long have you been planning this coup attempt, Senator?"

"There's only been one coup," she said calmly. "That was Chalk's."

Yantel snorted derisively but Saaraï knew he was using bluster to hide that he was intrigued. Eldon, the most senior Imperial senator, was being curiously quiet, and Saaraï sensed he was letting Yantel go on the attack for him.

White-haired Speaker Brighton said, "We've seen your evidence, Monia, and it was quite compelling. But it's not *proof*."

"Holo-recordings can always be faked," added Yantel.

"Yes. I was just about to say that, young man." Brighton gave the Imperial a grandfather's smile. "But assuming it is true, what do you expect us to do?"

"Respect the empress' final wishes," said Azlyn. "We have people at FNB headquarters now. They've secured the place without any problem and are standing by for a broadcast, on behalf of the entire senate, declaring Chalk a usurper and ordering the military to cease following his orders."

The senators bled collective vertigo. Senator Kormesh, another leading moderate, said, "That might not be legal. There's nothing in the Federation constitution giving us the right to oust the regent."

"According to the constitution there shouldn't even *be* a regent," Monia pointed out. "There should be a triumvirate."

"The fact remains, the executive and legislature are separate," said Rey'lya. "And the military answers wholly to the executive. We have no power over it."

"Chalk is a usurper. He betrayed his empress and tried to kill her." Azlyn turned harsh looks at Yantel, Eldon, and the other Imperials. "Right now there *is* no legitimate executive. That means all powers falls to you."

Saaraï knew most of the beings in this room, and she knew

they'd all sought power in one form or another, driven by that curious mix of vanity and idealism that lay at the heart of politics. But right now she felt them all hesitate, even Brighton. They were scared to challenge Chalk and, more, afraid to take bold action when they could not be sure of the consequences. She'd never seen those proud politicians so lost.

"Our people have also just secured the shield generator control for Galactic City," said K'Kruhk. "They will hold it up at all costs. Rest assured, you will be safe from reprisals."

"With all respect, Master Jedi, you're not in the position to say that," Rey'lya shook her head.

"There are many in the military who will follow the senate if they declare Chalk a criminal," said Monia. "The fleet is full of good, honorable beings who'd never stand by a man who overthrew his empress. Frankly, I don't understand how anyone can stand with him now."

Yantel opened his mouth for sharp rebuke, but Eldon interrupted him gently. "The accusation against Chalk is serious. And I'm sad to say it would explain much. But right now, all you have is what appears to be a message from a dead woman. That's not good enough."

"What more proof would you need?" asked Saaraï.

Eldon regarded her. "Miss Derrol, do you have any more evidence that Marasiah Fel was *not* killed three years ago? Even another holo-record could corroborate you."

She sensed regret from Monia and Azlyn, but found her thoughts were in accord with K'Kruhk's. She looked to the Whiphid master and said, "We can share it with them, can't we? We can share it all."

K'Kruhk exhaled loudly. "From Jedi to Jedi, it might be possible. But for these..."

"It might still be possible," she insisted. "We have to try."

Saaraï bled sincerity in the Force. If they failed to convince the senators to stand together here than everything they'd gone through to get here- everyone they'd lost- had been for nothing.

And in that clarity of purpose, Saaraï found something to sustain her against her own dark.

Senator Yantel looked between them, confused. "What are you prattling about? Some mystic nonsense? If you think *that* will convince us-

“It will,” said Saara, and she entered his mind.

She entered all their minds. Her insertion was strong and forceful, the way her father had taught her to manipulate the minds of vermin. And in that instant when she touched the twenty-three other souls in this room she felt she could act in power over them, command them, break them. It was intoxicating and glorious, as the dark side always was.

K’Kruhk brushed her mind, warning her against the desire to dominate.

Easily, without his help, Saara fell back from it. Instead she let herself spread equally across all the other minds, mingling thought and sensation, sustained by the connection that had always linked them in the Force but could now be felt with clarity like never before.

K’Kruhk, ancient and powerful, took the lead, but instead of forcing his will on those other minds he shared with them pieces of his own. There he was, standing on a landing pad with Marasia and overlooking an immense forest. His sympathy for the woman’s wounded soul spread across the meld, and they felt it as vividly as K’Kruhk had in that melancholy, long-off instant.

Azlyn presented her own thoughts next. There she was to help pull Marasia out of the wreckage of the flagship *Alliance* after the massacre of Bey’s fleet. She spoke with the empress among the jungles of Yavin 4 and stood with her on Zonama’s wind-swept, frigid mountaintop.

Through Azlyn’s memory they all watched as Marasia stepped into the pillar of light, surrendering her throne and herself. They knew it as a moment of liberation for them all.

Saara had nothing to add to the meld. Her experiences with Marasia had been brief and passive. But for all her wounds there had been an ultimate strength in her, first and final, bred into her by a family destined for rule. The weight of her suffering and sacrifice was smothering, and when the meld suddenly released she found herself gasping for air.

So were all the others. The senators looked around, confused and shocked, searching for sense in each others’ eyes and finding nothing. One by one, they looked to K’Kruhk. Even the Imperials were begging the Jedi for explanation.

“What you have just seen is the truth,” he said.

“Damned Jedi mind tricks,” muttered Yantel.

“It was so *vivid*...” whispered another Imperial.

Rey’lya sucked in breath. “What was the point of that, Master Jedi? Was that your proof that Marasiah survived, and everything she said in that holo was true?”

“It *is* true,” Azlyn said softly. “Every word.”

The senators looked around, still struggling for response. Attention fell anew on Eldon and Brighton, the two senior leaders of their respective camps. The old men looked at each other, and Saaraï felt a bond of understanding grow between them. It was a leftover of the tie that had just connected them, sustained by the lingering power of the Force. Together, in sync, both men accepted the new evidence as incontrovertible.

“You know that Chalk is a liar and a murderer,” Saaraï told them. “He has no right to be regent. If you don’t stand up to him now, you’ll never stand up at all.”

Eldon sighed. Without timidity he told her, “There’s no guarantee the military will listen to us if we make a broadcast.”

“They certainly won’t listen to you if you *don’t*,” Azlyn said.

Brighton smiled tiredly. “A fine point, young lady. You said you have people at the FNB office right now?”

“Yes,” said K’Kruhk. “Taking you there now is impossible, but I’m sure you can connect us directly to their transceiver.”

“I believe we could patch in a call.” Brighton looked at Eldon. “It would be more effective coming from us both.”

The whole room seemed to hold breath, waiting for Eldon to respond, but Saaraï’s Force-sense was keen and she knew exactly what he’d say.

“It would be even better coming from all three of us,” the Imperial said. “Is that still possible?”

Azlyn removed Marasiah’s message disc from her belt and handed it to him with the tired, satisfied smile of a woman come to journey’s end.

The other side of the tunnel connecting the abandoned Temple to the government palace was unguarded, as were the surrounding halls. The nearer Shado got to his sister the easier it was to locate her presence. She was aware he was near and actively reaching out to him now, and sometimes their connection was so vivid she could even give him instructions



on what routed to take through the palace's labyrinthine halls. All the while he, Kyra, Shado, and Deliah progressed quickly, using the Force to blur security cameras and avoid the rare guards patrolling the dark, near-empty building.

Of course, it couldn't stay easy.

The droids standing sentinel outside the detention block took them by surprise. As soon as they turned the corner, two towering automatons sprayed laserfire in their faces. Deliah and Jariah ducked back for cover but Shado and Kyra ignited lightsabers to deflect the hail of blue stun bolts.

As they stepped closer, the bolts changed to lethal red. Wordlessly, Shado told Kyra to take the droid on the right. She lunged for it, while he went after the one on the left. The Force moved through him as it had in the past, smoothly guiding his limbs so he could twitch his lightsaber to deflect every shot. When he got close enough to the droid he knew when to duck beneath a weeping metal arm, and without conscious thought he knew where to slash the droid's abdomen in order to neatly split it in half. Sparks flew and the metal torso crashed noisily to the floor. With one active push in the Force, he knocked the splayed legs to the ground.

Rearing up, Shado saw Kyra finish off her droid. There was nothing passive about the way she used the Force. She used desperation and anger as fuel as she battled back each attack, then hacked off each of the droid's limbs before spearing its metallic face through. When she was done she was panting, and the white of her blade gleamed on her damp forehead. Shado hadn't even broken a sweat.

Kyra wasn't going dark, he thought, but she was dancing close to a dangerous line. It wasn't that she didn't know how to use the Force in other ways; rather she was relying on her current emotions to command her.

As she stood over the dismembered droid, he felt her reach out with the Force, probably seeking this Eli Horn.

Jariah and Deliah came round the corner, weapons still high. The latter said, "Don't relax yet. There's people on the other side of that door and I'll bet they're armed."

Shado looked at the Zeltron. "You can feel that?"

Deliah shrugged, embarrassed. It was a rare expression for her.

Jariah checked the door controls. "Locked. No surprise. You wanna cut your way through?"

"That would be the plan." Shado looked at Kyra. "I'd like to avoid killing, if I have to."

"I know," she said, and kicked a droid's torn-off forearm down the hall.

She and Shado used their lightsabers again. It sliced smoothly through the edges of the door, and Shado could feel the guards on the other side tense. Beyond them, just down the corridor, he felt Astraal keenly awaiting him.

When they'd cut the door completely through, they used the Force to push it ahead. Rather than throw it into the hall beyond they shoved it forward slowly. The two-meter metal shield forced the guards to backstep and in turn gave cover to Deliah and Jariah, who peeked out from either edge and sprayed stun bolts into the room beyond. One after another, Shado felt minds wink out, not into death but artificial sleep. He could feel Kyra anxious and eager to really fight, but she held back with him, raising the shield with the Force and sometimes swiping it from side to side, always keeping Deliah and Jariah under cover as they cleared the chamber.

Finally, when it all seemed done, they used the Force wedge to door into the frame from which it had been cut. It wouldn't stop backup when it arrived, but it would slow it down. Shado reached out with the Force and didn't sense anyone coming, at least not anyone living. Then he felt Astraal, so close.

While Kyra and Deliah stayed in the detention blocks foyer and moved the stunned bodies to the walls, Shado kedd the Force guide him down one long corridor, past a dozen sealed-tight cell doors before he found the one he knew contained his sister. Jariah was jogging to keep up, blaster still in hand.

"Hey," he called. "You sure this is the right one?"

"Absolutely," Shado said, then stabbed his lightsaber into the metal door.

He could barely keep his hands still as he carved. It felt to him that he wasn't just saving Astraal right now; he was making small, necessary recompense for walking out in his friends when they badly needed him. Frustrated by his failure to do great things he'd surrendered on doing smaller ones too. He could never turn back time, never talk to Cade again, but he

could at least get this right.

When the door fell open and he saw Astraal coiled inside the cell, it took his breath away.

She sprung off the bunk and was on him immediately. Her fierce hug was like a vise around his shoulders and her head rested against his collar. Into his chest she said, "It's good to feel you again, Shado." In the flesh and in the Force.

"It's good to be felt," he said. He'd had no idea how good until now. It almost brought him to tears.

He wasn't sure how long they embraced, but soon Jariah coughed loudly. "Listen, I'm happy for you and all, but we need to get our butts moving before backup arrives."

Astraal looked at him for the first time in surprise. Shado let his arms drop and said, "It's a long story. Very long. But he's right. We need to get moving."

They hurried up to the detention level's foyer, where Kyra and Deliah waited anxiously. The Zeltron said, "I feel somebody coming, but they ain't here yet. Let's get moving."

"Where are we going?" asked Astraal as Shado removed the carved door and cleared their exit.

"Back the way we came, probably," he said. "Unless we get to an outer wall. Then we might be able to cut through a window and escape to the outside..."

"You mean somebody can pick us up?"

"Maybe. I need to call the other Jedi and see what they're doing."

"What do you mean? I don't know what's going on. They haven't told me anything."

"There's too much to tell right now," said Jariah. "Come on, let's *move*."

As they hurried into the hall and began retracing their steps to the tunnel, Kyra came on Shado's other shoulder and lowered her voice.

"We should call the Jedi now," she said. "They need to come here."

"I don't know if they can spare speeders for a pick-up."

"No, I mean they need to *be* here." She stopped and put a hand on Shado's arm. "I can feel Eli clearer now. There was something weird about him in the Force but I know what it is now. I could feel him too."

Deliah and Jariah had also stopped. The latter asked, "What are you talking about, *pateesa*?"

"Eli is here. And so is Chalk." Her face went hard and tilted up. "I think they're maybe ten storeys, straight up. If we call more Jedi we can get them both. We can end this, right now."

They were coming. Eli was certain of it. The Force- his tool, his master, his enemy- spoke to him clearly, and he knew that he'd gotten through to Kyra.

When Chalk had told him the plan he hadn't expected it to work, but he'd tried anyway. Sitting in the grand dark chamber, surrounded by stormtroopers but isolated in the Force, Eli had dropped into a meditative state. He'd felt Kyra and a few others draw closer; two were familiar, but only vaguely. He'd focused on Kyra alone. Leaving his Force-presence open without actively touching her, he'd let her view the thoughts inside him.

The thoughts were of Hogrum Chalk. He'd clung to the memory of all his experiences with the regent and constructed them into an edifice of the man himself. He'd allowed himself to become that man, feeling and thinking as Chalk did. After all the time they'd spent together, it was easy and harrowing. Chalk was a grim man, scarred in body and mind, driven by stubbornness and all-consuming spite. Chalk hated the beings he ruled. He hated war and hated peace. He hated all his lost family and even, in a twisted way, he hated the memory of the sister he told himself he loved. It was no wonder the man hated the Force, because the Force was life and deep down Chalk desired nothing but oblivion, even if he didn't realize it consciously.

Eli had let Chalk's spite fester inside him until he could hardly bear the cold emptiness in his heart. But because the plan demanded it, he endured the experience of being Hogrum Chalk. And as planned, Kyra had picked up their mixed Force-essences and assumed the one man was two.

He couldn't tell if she'd bring help. He knew K'Kruhk was somewhere on this world, and there were surely more Jedi besides. Still seated cross-legged on the floor he looked around the room and saw the gathered stormtroopers waiting for action. Invisible in the Force, they seemed to him like hollow

droids, but soon they'd fight and be killed.

Talon's lightsaber was still in his palm. Eli stared at it and wondered. Talon and Skywalker both had killed many stormtroopers during their last mountaintop battle. Yet for all the killing they'd done he'd felt nothing dark in them, and when his blade had speared through Talons' gut her face had relaxed into a stunning smile. In all the years he'd known her, he'd never seen her smile.

This weapon was one of a woman transformed. He told himself that was all because of the good he'd done in freeing her from the Force. The killing he was about to do would help keep the galaxy free. He told himself again and again, but it was hard to believe it.

As he'd sat there imagining himself to be Hogrum Chalk, Eli had felt himself touched by darkness. It was not the darkness of the Sith, who'd embraced passion and ambition, but rather a black pit that swallowed all light. That kind of darkness was Chalk's; it was the embodiment of the nihilism he worked upon the galaxy.

That was what Eli was going to bring about. It made him want to shout, weep, and vomit all at once.

He felt Kyra draw near, slowly. Maybe she'd bring help, maybe not. When she stepped close enough he'd detonate explosives, dropping part of whatever corridor she was approaching from. He'd trap her and her Jedi allies here, strip them of the Force, and let the stormtroopers slaughter them. He'd turn beings of light to cold, dead flesh. Chalk's triumph would be the triumph of emptiness, an ultimate denial of life even the Sith would revolt from.

Eli squeezed the lightsaber so hard his hands hurt. He wanted to scream so badly he bit his lip to keep silent. He stayed seated in his cold void and waited for them to come.

Getting the Force back had had a staggering impact on the other Knights. Asaak seemed ready to burst with new confidence, and Azlyn had found an inviolable inner strength. But unlike them, Ganner Krieg still felt rattled to his core.

He couldn't explain it. He prayed it would be different. During the long awful years without the Force he'd craved the serenity it had once brought him. After losing his best friend,

his empress, and his very purpose for living, the faint hope of getting the Force back had been the one thing to keep him going. He'd thought it would make him whole again.

Yet it hadn't. He could feel its power inside him, but where once it had been peaceful it now felt volatile. He'd given in to some darker urges during the years of silence and he was terrified they might manifest through the Force. More, he no longer had faith it would help him. Silence had taught him self-reliance and a distrust of promised salvation. Maybe the Force was offering that to him now, but if it was, he couldn't bring himself to accept.

But the Force had been useful in some ways. Even before Saara had spoken up about the cables running down the interior of the lift tube, he'd felt something strange about them. When she spoke her thoughts it had given him permission to act on his own desires.

So, letting Saara and Azlyn and K'Kruhk go about their mission, he'd dropped down into the shaft, riding it lower and lower to the levels of the towers' vertical city that probably hadn't been seen by living eyes since its construction. Or, he thought, since someone had laid this strange cable all the way to the base of the skyscraper.

His bad feeling got worse. The air down here was getting hot and rank. Sweat dampened his forehead and itched in his beard. The burn of the fiberchord made his palms ache. Still he kept going down, tracing the cable, until his glowlamp finally lit on something that made his heart stop.

Every Imperial Knight received infantry training, and that included the basics of demolition duty. Ganner therefore knew the unassuming rectangular box affixed to the wall, as long as his calf and wide as his hand, was a double-loaded nergon-14 charge. Clinging to the fiberchord, feet planted on the wall, he spun his light around and saw that the cables he'd been chased had split apart. Each smaller fiber connected to a box of nergon-14, and he marked six of them forming a perfectly-placed ring along the edge of the shaft.

There was still space beneath him. Ganner tilted his light downward, tracing wires running out of the nergon-14 charges and finding another row of six explosive placed in another ring, perhaps seven meters below. And when his light went lower

still, he spotted another set.

That many explosives, this far down and placed in the center of the tower, would be enough to knock the whole skyscraper over. Likely similar charges had been placed in the other two senatorial towers, and Ganner knew who'd planted them.

It was all his fears made manifest. He groped for solace in the Force but it only intensified his panic. For a moment he felt so dazed he almost dropped his fiberchord and went plunging into the dark.

When he'd brought himself under control, Ganner activated his comm and hailed Azlyn. He waited, seemingly forever, until her voice came on, incongruously upbeat.

"Ganner, is that you?" she asked. "We've made contact with the senators. They've agreed to speak against Chalk, together."

"Azlyn, you can't let them do that," he rasped.

"What do you mean?"

"Azlyn... I'm down almost at the very bottom of the tower. I'm looking at eighteen double-packs of nergon-14, primed and ready to blow."

He let her wrap her mind around that. It took some time. "Ganner," she said hoarsely, "We have to get you out of there."

"No. If your senators send that message, Chalk can blow the whole tower. All *three* towers, probably. Nobody will survive. I have to stay down here and defuse them."

"Do you even know how?"

"I've got some training, remember? I don't know about the other two towers..." He tried to gather thoughts, examine possibilities. He could only do so much.

"I'll send someone down to help you," said Azlyn.

"Okay. Send Gresk. I think he has demo training. Wait, no. Send him *up*. Those cables keep going up the shaft. Have him follow them and find out what they're patched into. I'm guessing it's a receiver someplace high up in the building, where the signal's clear."

"I don't suppose you can just cut the wires," she said.

"I don't think so. And Azlyn, you can't make your broadcast. The moment it goes out- if it goes out-"

"We all die. I get it."

A faint, nervous hum buzzed on the comm. To fill it Ganner asked, "Are you getting help?"

“Yes. Yes, I’ll get help. Just... hang in there. Don’t *you* do anything dangerous either.”

“Understood. I’ll wait here until you get a report from Gresk. Ganner, out.”

He flicked off his comm, relieved for the silence. Talking with Azlyn made him more anxious still; it reminded him what his life might, could, should have been.

His life now was suspended by a literal thread. When Azlyn had told him not to do anything dangerous, she’d apparently forgotten that he was suspended between rings of primed explosives. The thought made him laugh, bitter and wheezing. The sound echoed grotesquely up the shaft.

Slowly, carefully, Ganner maneuvered so his feet were on the protruding ring that jutted from the wall. Then he pressed his back against hard metal, then lowered to a squat, and finally sat down. His backside just barely fit on the ledge and his legs dangled over an abyss primed to explode, but at least he could give his body a rest.

With nothing else to do, Ganner sat in the dark and waited.

For centuries Anaxes had been the fortress world of the Core. It was a garrison for the capital, a training center of eager naval recruits, and a permanent home for generations of military aristocracy. Gar Stazi had never much liked the place when he’d been a cadet here. The instructors were too rigid, the bluebloods too pompous. He hadn’t particularly wanted to come here, but he knew that if his scattershot hit-and-run attacks were to do any real damage, they’d have to hit a real target hard.

Reports also placed the Federation fleet’s commander, Admiral Edouard Fenel, here, and Stazi couldn’t deny that was part of his motivation too. There was no love lost between them personally or professionally, and he looked forward to delivering some punishment the human badly needed.

But first he’d have to get close. When *Inviolable* and the rest of his battle group dropped out of hyperspace they did so at the exact location expected, behind Anaxes’ solitary moon. And, as expected, there was a pair of *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers there, probably plotting an ambush on anyone who dared attack the planet. Instead they were ambushed themselves and Stazi



commanded a charge that lit up the space between his ships and theirs with plasma and missile trails.

*Inviolable's* shields became so bright with energy scatter the viewport was useless, and Stazi turned his attention to the static-marred tactical holo. Aside from this little engagement at the moon, his sensors tracked at least three more star destroyers over Anaxes, plus support craft. There may well have been other ships on the far side of the planet too. Despite his trying to draw the Federation forces thin with widespread feints, Fenel hadn't fallen for the bait. He was keeping Anaxes, and therefore Coruscant, well-protected.

Despite having the element of surprise and landing a few lucky blows, Stazi's fleet was still evenly matched with the two star destroyers, and the battle began to grind towards a stalemate. He certainly didn't have enough firepower to take on all Anaxes, but that wasn't his goal. He just wanted to land a blow on Fenel.

As *Inviolable's* bridge began to shudder from missile impact further down the hull, Stazi went over to Rou at the helm station.

"Captain," he told the stout Alanteen, "Prepare to withdraw. Get ready to lay down sensor buoys like we planned."

"Of course, sir." Rou seemed relieved to get out of this current mess. He probably wouldn't like the next one.

When Stazi gave the signal, Rou gave the order, and *Inviolable* began to withdraw from the destroyers. Both wedge-shaped ships were streaked black from the initial ambush, and instead of pursuing they elected to hold close to the moon, instead sending wings of fighters and bombers to harass Stazi's ships. The TIEs were no small threat. They continued to pound *Inviolable's* shields and managed to break defenses on one of the small Correllian gunships. The ship's engines took a critical hit and the entire vessel burst to a fireball. No escape pods, no survivors. It was the first major loss Stazi's task force had suffered, and a sour note to end the battle on.

*Inviolable* and its support ships jumped away, but not for long. After just four minutes in lightspeed they dropped into deep space and drifted among the stars. Stazi and Rou huddled near the tactical holo to review the data coming in from the two sensor buoys they'd left at Anaxes. As he'd hoped, the devices

were camouflaged by all the other post-battle debris, and over the next ten minutes they watched as the first support ships arrived to examine the battered star destroyers by the moon. One other destroyer pulled ahead, perhaps to defend them against a repeat attack. Some of the rebels' other task forces had pulled that trick, withdrawing and then jumping back in the same spot to kick the enemy again as they licked their wounds.

Stazi knew the dangers of playing the same trick too many times, which was why he had a small twist planned for this engagement. The sensor buoys not only tracked ship movements; they also registered electronic interference denoting transmission bursts coming out of the star destroyers. One in particular was ablaze with activity, and it was holding far from the moon and the other destroyers.

"That's *Resolute*," Stazi said huskily. "Fenel's ship."

"It appears likely, sir," Rou said. "But it's fairly deep within Anaxes' natural gravity field. We won't be able to drop out of hyperspace right on top of it. He'll have time to prepare and defend."

"I know. But if we strike fast and hard we might be able to take him out before backup arrives. Captain, if we break Fenel we can break this whole offensive."

The Alanteen looked reluctant, but he asked, "Where should we insert, sir?"

Stazi tapped a spot on the holo. "Plot us a course. Two or three micro-jumps should let us fall in at exactly this angle. From here we can use the planet's natural gravity to maximize thruster speed and drop on Fenel from behind, where he's least protected."

"I understand, sir. We should be ready to jump in six minutes."

Rou scurried away. Stout, practical, and no gambler, her reminded Stazi a little of Jaius Yorub. Certainly he had more in common with the dour Sullustan than big, bold Jhoram Bey. Despite his hesitation he gave orders quickly, and the task force was ready for its micro-jumps in a mere four minutes. Stazi had always been lucky with his captains. He hoped this one fared better than Jaius or Jhoram.

Three short flashes through hyperspace returned them to Anaxes. The planet loomed much closer now as they fell

toward it, and Fenel's star destroyer was an off-white arrow-head against the violet and blue-green landscape.

"All ships, concentrate fire on *Resolute*," Stazi commanded. "Fighters, bombers, go ahead and soften them up. Forward guns, fire as soon as you're in range. We need to smash him while we can! Tactical, what's their response so far?"

The officer at that station said, "Slow, sir. The three destroyers by the moon have barely budged. Another one's crossing over the planet's north pole but it's still.... nine minutes away. A few frigates are trying to intercept us."

"What about *Resolute*?"

"Holding position over the planet, but it's angling its port side to face us."

"Tell the fighters to keep going after its rear. We'll spread attacks wide and soften up its shields."

Stazi felt the thrill of victory swell inside him. Maybe it was adrenaline, maybe it was the Force, but he was absolutely certain he could break Fenel here, and with him went Chalk's fleet. He stalked to the forward viewport so he could watch with his own eyes as the first explosions ripples across *Resolute*'s shields. With every second the inferno grew brighter, but he didn't look away.

And then three words tore his attention. "Incoming from hyperspace!" cried the tactical officer. "Captain, Admiral, you need to see this."

Stazi turned back to the tactical holo to see four star destroyers coming Anaxes from beneath its south pole. With a flicker, one red marker corrected itself: not a star destroyer, but an interdictor. And *Inviolable* was now well within Anaxes' natural gravity well.

"That drag ship's warming up its generators now, sir," the lieutenant warned. "I'm not sure if we can punch out in time."

"We'll have to try," Stazi snarled, cursing his own impetuosity. "Helm, turn us around! Plot the best hyperspace route out of this system! Tell all other ships to jump away as soon as they can!"

*Inviolable*'s crew hurried to comply. As they did so, a comm officer said, "Admiral, we're getting a call from the destroyer *Carida Fire*. They're asking to speak to you personally."

Bovark again. Stazi didn't have time for this. "Ignore it," he

snapped. "Helm, do we have a course?"

"Course plotted, sir, but we're still minutes away from the jump point."

"Then shunt power from shields if you have to. Just get us there."

The viewport showed only stars now. Though *Resolute* was nipping at their aft no one was in position to intercept them, and Stazi's anger gave way to relief. At least they'd get out of this and stage another attack. He watched as two quick corvettes shot past *Inviolable*, dwindled to pinpoints against the stars, then flared to lightspeed and safety.

And then, just as hope peaked, the deck trembled lightly. The tactical officer, voice suddenly dead, declared, "That interdiction field is up. We're not going anywhere."

Stazi recalled once boasting that he'd walked into dozens of Imperial traps in his career. He'd subsequently been warned that one day he might not walk out of one.

"Just like old times," he muttered, then raised his voice. Despite it all, to his own shock, he found he wasn't afraid. "Captain, turn us around to face *Resolute*. If you can, take position so Fenel is between us and the new destroyers. If we go down, I swear to every god I will take him with us."

## Chapter Forty-Seven

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The sky over Galactic City was still full black. City light bleached out the stars but the sky lanes were empty and the scene felt eerily frozen, like they were trapped in a night without end. Cool wind blew across the landing pad, brushing hair into Kyra's face. She felt a few strands tickle the sensitive skin of her left-cheek scar and turned her head.

Shado had led them to this place. The blunt protrusion jutted out from the slope of the palace complex's southwest side and had only enough room for a small landspeeder, but a dozen speeder bikes had swooped down in fast succession, dropping off a mix of Jedi and rebel commandos all come here for the singular goal of taking Hogrum Chalk.

K'Kruhk and Karrashchakkuk stood tall among the crowd. The Whiphid had hurried here from the senatorial towers, the Wookiee from the shield generator control station, which Master Rasi Tuum now held in firm control. Asaak Dan had arrived, as well as several commandos who'd been with Kyra during the Selvaris operation. One soldier she didn't know hoisted Astraal Vao onto his speeder bike and flew her to safety while her brother watched from the landing pad's edge, satisfied with that he'd done and ready to accomplish more.

The sight of everyone eager to take the fight to Chalk should have been encouraging, especially since Kyra had been the one to call for help. Despite that, she was deeply unsettled. Eli was still there, hovering at the corner of her mind. Sometimes she felt Chalk with him, sometimes not. She never got the sense Eli was trying to contact her directly, but he had to have felt her by

now. Despite that, the journey from the detention block to this landing pad had been without problem. Only a few security patrols had tried to stop them, and no airspeeders tried to swoop down on them now while they were exposed.

When she went up to K'Kruhk she said, "This is too easy."

Jariah, who'd been standing arms-crossed beside the door to the palace, said, "You think? This has gotta be a trap."

K'Kruhk took a deep breath and reached out with the Force. He said, "I feel young Horn. And perhaps Chalk as well."

"Best I can tell, they haven't moved this whole time," Kyra said. "Could be they're in a situation room, but they must have felt us by now. Either they're super-confident in their guards, or... I don't know."

"Any chance what you're feeling could be faked?" asked Deliah.

K'Kruhk shook his head. "People can deceive, but the Force cannot. There is definitely a live presence there."

Jariah looked across the Jedi. "You boys have been running around town. Anybody else pick up a whiff of Chalk?"

Karrash hooted a negative, and Asaak said, "Absolutely nothing. But if he's on Coruscant, he must be in here."

After a sort, tense silence, Jariah groaned. "Well, hell. No point standing around like some *koochoo wermos*. If there's a trap, let's spring it."

"You're getting brave, Jariah," Shado said, almost cheerfully.

"Kark brave. I'm just antsy." He looked up at the pure-black sky, and the city's invisible shield. "Let's get under cover before somebody drops a missile on us."

On a signal from K'Kruhk they filed back into the palace. Kyra quickly moved to the head of the line. If she'd called them into a trap, she'd be the first to walk into it. Without her wishing it, she'd become responsible for everything again.

Hogrum Chalk watched things unfold in seclusion. His chamber was dark except for the glow of the holos by which he monitored the rebels' scattered raids, the siege at Sluis Van, and the entrapment at Anaxes. Fenel had acted on his own initiative to summon Captain Bovark and the interdicator which now pinned Gar Stazi near the garrison planet. Maybe that had been good luck; maybe the Force was starting to move through

Fenel now. Either way, Hogrum was grateful. On the holo he watched the two admirals' ships exchange furious barrages while four more Federation destroyers drew close on all sides, ready to squeeze Stazi until he popped.

Killing Stazi would solve one of Hogrum's two big problems. He hoped the next one would resolve soon too. Just as he thought to make the call, Eli initiated it himself. Hogrum held his buzzing comlink in hand and flipped it on.

"Report," he said simply.

"They're coming now," Eli said. "I can feel K'Kruhk and perhaps a dozen other Jedi."

Hogrum had been hoping for more but a dozen Jedi, including their Grand Master, was still a good prize. He wondered what others might be loose in the capital. "Can you sense where they're coming from?"

"I do. They might try to split up when they get close."

"Every corridor leading into your hall is mined. Explode the charges and trap them inside with the ysalamiri. Then you can slaughter them."

"I know the plan." Eli's voice rankled.

"Then you should be able to carry it out."

"I feel hesitation from them. They may suspect it's a trap."

"They'd be fools not to. Send a few sorties of stormtroopers after them. Keep them on their toes. You might even pick off one or two before they reach the killing zone."

"I understand."

"Good. Then do what you have to."

Hogrum thumbed the comm and pocketed it. Eli was a far less reliable tool than Fenel but he couldn't afford to turn away the young man's help. Against Force-users, the only weapon that really worked was other Force-users. Even the ysalamiri were accessories in comparison.

He cleared his thoughts. Even if Eli failed, he'd prepared contingencies. He turned his attention to the holo from Anaxes and savored the sight of Stazi's impending doom. Of that victory he felt assured. The rest could follow from there.

When the call came Ganner had surrendered himself fully to darkness, having shut off his glowlamp and let the pitch-black of the lift shaft's bottom envelope him. Barring the threat of

the eighteen nergon-14 charges primed around him and set to blow him to atoms, he almost felt peaceful.

The buzz of his comlink surprise him and he nearly fell off the ledge on which he sat, but he was able to steady himself and activate the comm.

"This is Ganner," he whispered, voice resonant in the dark. "Tell me you have good news."

"That depends on your definition of 'good,'" said a rasping voice, not Azlyn's like he'd been expecting. It sounded like Gresk, the Bothan scout he'd sent to trace the bombs' activation cables.

"Give me the news and I'll let you know," Ganner said.

"I've traced the cable up the lift shaft, and it went a long way up. All the way to a comm transceiver located thirteen floors from the top."

Ganner had expected something like that. "Tell me you can just kill the transceiver."

"We sent somebody up to look at it. They think the transceiver's been sending a steady down pulse to the charges that basically says, 'do not blow up.' And if we kill that signal—"

"We kill ourselves. I get it. It's like a deadman switch." Of course things wouldn't be easy.

"Here's some good news," Gresk offered. "We've been in contact with the other towers. They've checked and found no charges and no transceiver on either of them."

"Are you sure? They might be in different places."

"The fundamental layout of all three towers is identical. They found nothing. Maybe they missed something... Or maybe this tower is rigged to blow in a way that will take the other two down."

The thought had already occurred to Ganner. A basic part of laying demolitions was prepping your charges to control the direction of the blast. With the towers located as close as they were, it would be very easy to tip this tower into the nearest one, and that one into its neighbor, creating a domino of destruction that would wipe out the entire Federation senate.

After a moment in the dark Ganner asked, "Is that the good news?"

"Maybe," the Bothan offered. "Except it means you have to disable the bombs from there. Can you do that?"



"I can do that."

The comm buzzed silence. Gresk asked, "Are you sure? It's the top cable coming into the right side. But if they're all linked up in a chain-"

"Which they are. I'll have to start from the bottom and work my way up."

"I'll come down to help," Gresk offered.

"I can get it. Is Azlyn in the comm center?"

"Still is, yes."

"Then have her stand by. I'll be done in a minute."

Ganner cut off the comm and flicked on his glowlamp. A white pool shone on the curved side of the shaft. He moved it to find one charge of nergon-14, then another and another. As Gresk had said, they were all tied up in a continuous spiral, which meant if he disarmed any bomb except the one at the bottom of the chain, it would set off that damned dead man's switch.

Chalk's people had been good rigging this whole thing. He hoped it was haste that had prevented them from setting the other two towers to blow, and not some other reason.

Either way, he knew what he had to do and got to work. Taking his fiberchord in both hands Ganner lowered himself to the third ring of nergon-14 charges and swung the light of his glowlamp around until he found the one with only a single set of wires running into it. He traced the chain through the next five charges to be sure, then swung himself to the wall next to the very bottom charge.

He'd felt almost calm waiting in the dark, but now his nerves were getting to him again. He remembered his demolitions training from his early days of Knighthood. It chimed with Gresk's advice: cut the top cable entering the right side of the charge box. He wouldn't use his lightsaber for something so precise. All he'd need was a tiny touch of the Force to pinch the little wire and snap it.

But before he broke the first wire, he hesitated. The enormity of the task on his shoulders- one he'd insisted on taking, every step of the way- threatened to pull him to the bottom of the shaft. It wasn't just his own life he was playing with. It was the lives of the whole Federation Senate, a band of rebels he called friends, Grand Master K'Kruhk. And of course Azlyn, who in

some ways mattered more to him than any of those.

Before the silence he'd put faith in the Force because it was always with him when he'd needed it most. When it had gone silent it had failed to aid him too, and he'd been helpless to save Antares from death and Marasiah from all her suffering.

Slowly, quietly, he'd come to hate the Force. He hated it for failing him. Strange that now, of all times, he'd finally admitted it to himself, and he admitted that part of him hated the Force still. It had deserted him in his hour of need before; how could he bring himself to trust it now?

His heart beat fast; his head throbbed. He stared at the wires in front of his face, blindingly bright from the close-up glowlamp. He had to use the Force, trust the Force, trust *himself* and the training he'd been given.

A weird giddiness came over him. The Jedi had that adage that there was no *try*. You either did or you didn't. In this case it was true; he'd either do it, or he'd do nothing and be nothing.

Ganner took a deep breath, trusted himself, and trusted the Force. He applied pressure on either side of the top-right wire, as precise and cutting as a pair of pliers. The wire snapped in front of his eyes and nothing happened.

He breathed again, then moved around to the next nergon-14 charge. With less hesitation he grabbed that wire with the fingers of his mind, pressed, and snapped. He circled around, completing the bottom ring of six charges, and disarmed them one after another.

He completed two more circles, moving more swiftly after every severed wire. With each little snip he felt his old trust in the Force grow and his uncertainty decline. By the time he got to the top row he was hardly thinking about his actions. He just *did* it, disarming one lethal charge after another until they'd all been cut free. He could barely remember a time when the Force had flowed through him so easily.

Just as he severed the final cable, Ganner heard a clanging higher up in the shaft. He swung his glowlamp upward and the glare caught the boots of a figure repelling downward.

"It's me!" Gresk shouted down. "Coming to help!"

"You don't have to," Ganner smiled. "It's done."

Gresk peered down to his light. "*Done*, done?"

"Done, done."

“Well, I’m sorry for doubting you, my Impy friend. I suppose you should make the call, then.”

Ganner was happy to. As Gresk slowly continued his descent, he took out his comlink and hailed Azlyn. A few seconds later her voice came on, warm and welcoming despite the audible stress.

“Tell me you gave good news,” she said.

He smiled in the dark. “The nergon-14 charges have been disarmed. All of them.”

“You’re sure?”

Gresk, getting down to Ganner’s level now, peered at the charges with his keen Bothan eyes. Loudly he said, “They do in fact look disarmed. And we’re not dead yet, so I’d wager these looks do not deceive.”

“That’s excellent,” said Azlyn. “Thank you so much, Ganner. I’ve got Eldon and Brighton with me now. They’ll call FNB immediately.”

The comm clicked off and Ganner looked at Gresk, who was scanning the charges with the light of his glowlamp.

“You’re still not convinced?” he asked.

“I am now.” Gresk’s fur rippled slightly. “Come on, Mister Hero. Let’s get out of this damned pit.”

The Bothan began pulling himself upward, kicking his body clear of the wall every time he retracted his cable another few meters. Falling behind him, Ganner began his long climb out of the shaft. He moved more nimbly than the Bothan and soon outpaced him, because he knew the Force was with him.

The main broadcast control center in the Federation News Bureau headquarters reminded Jao somewhat of a star destroyer’s bridge, though instead of tense, alert naval officers in gray uniforms it was staffed by civilians slumped in their seats, warring between weariness and confusion after having been trapped in their workplace for over a standard day.

The FSB operations chief, a stout four-armed Toong’l named Warinmos, had explained that no one had been allowed to leave the building since lockdown. They were trying to cover the events happening across the galaxy as best through could, but there was so little they could do with the scant information the government was dripping their way.

When she'd said that Yalta Val had told her, with a restrained ambiguous smile, that she'd get her big scoop soon enough.

Jao and Val had set to wait in the broadcast center and Warinmos, though confused, hadn't dared gainsay two Knights in red armor. The other staffers, tired though they were, kept glancing at Jao and Val curiously, but none dared to ask what they were doing here. Warinmos lingered in the control room too and took to pacing, both sets of hands wringing behind her back, as she waited to find out what was going on.

Everything got started when a tired Farghul with very ruffled fur announced, "Director, we're getting an incoming transmission. It seems to be from one of the senatorial towers."

"Just the call we've been waiting for." Val strode to the Farghul's desk calmly and professionally. Jao was right behind him.

The Farghul's fur ruffled some more. "Do you, ah, wish to speak with them, sir?"

"Yes." Val looked to Warnimos. "Can you pipe this transmission into an emergency broadcast? I want this to go out on all channels, galaxy-wide."

"Ah, we can do that, yes. There might be some delay, since it's not our direct signal, and we may need to compress the data..."

"How long of a delay?" asked Jao.

She blinked big eyes. "One-point five to two seconds."

Val smiled easily. "I think that can be allowed. Don't broadcast it yet. Wait for my signal."

"Of course," Warinmos said, though she and the Farghul exchanged confused looks.

When the line opened, they saw a holo of Azlyn Rae looking dwarfed beside K'Kruhk. The Whiphid asked, "Are you ready to broadcast this transmission?"

"I've been assured it's all set to do," said Val. "Will this message be coming directly from the senators?"

"It will," said Azlyn. "We have Eldon, Brighton, and a few others ready to speak together."

Those names sparked attention. Staff were sitting upright and twisting in their seats to hear.

"That's good," said Val. "Put them on. We'll broadcast everything."

“Good. Start ‘casting now.”

Azlyn and K’Kruhk stepped aside. Val snapped two fingers at Warinmos, who told the Farghul, “Run the emergency broadcast declaration. Do it now.”

“Got it.” The Farghul flipped two switches. “Transmitting on all freqs.”

Just as he said it, five figures stepped into the holo-image. Jao recognized Senators Brighton and Eldon up front, with Senators Yantel, Rey’lya, and Monia Gahan standing behind them. It was a surprising show of solidarity, and it had the entire broadcast center at attention.

As Eldon began to speak, Jao leaned close to the Farghul and whispered, “Can we get this on a bigger holo?”

The technician was staring at his console in shock, but he nodded and flipped another switch. The senators appeared from a projector in the center of the room, double life size, and their words sounded clearly for all to hear.

“It is with great regret that we stand before you now,” said Eldon. “We, the Senate of the Galactic Federation, have been presented with interconvertible evidence that Regent Hogrum Chalk came to power by a string of criminal acts, including a coup against his niece Marasiah Fel.”

Gasps rippled through the broadcast room. Brighton put in, “The senate stands together in deploring these actions. We hereby move to strip Hogrum Chalk of all his authority immediately, especially his command over the Federation military. We have been assured that the offensives by Admiral Gar Stazi- whom we now certify was framed for the nonexistent murder of the Empress Fel- will cease as soon as the Federation navy stands down.”

Now Monia Gahan took a step forward. “We, the lawful elected government of the Federation, are commanding an immediate cease-fire from all sides. Hogrum Chalk must be arrested and made to stand trial for his crimes. A new government will be created in his absence and we, the elected Senate, pledge to create a unified Federation that will bring justice to all.”

She stepped back and let Eldon talk again. The old Imperial said, “We know this will come and stunning news to you all. I know it was incredible to me. But we stand here before you to

present you with some of that incontrovertible evidence. Please watch and listen to the truth of things, from the mouth of our true empress.”

And the senators flickered and disappeared. In an instant they were replaced by the stern, sorrowful face of Marasiah Fel. The beings around Jao in the broadcast center went breathless. And he knew, across Coruscant, across the Federation, countless others were doing the same.

Watching her holo-image, Jao shuddered under its intensity. For a moment it was like he was on Zonama Sekot again, standing with her on that windswept mountaintop before a pillar of light.

“To all who would listen,” she said, “I am Marasiah Fel, rightful empress and head of state of the Galactic Federation. I regret that I can’t speak the truth to you in person, but I will do it now...”

Alarms screamed, console-lights flashed red, and an acrid invisible smoke tainted the air. Gar Stazi didn’t know where the smell was coming from and it didn’t matter. *Inviolable* was a ship on verge of breaking at a dozen different points.

As the deck trembled he tried to focus on the tactical display. Red markers denoting hostile star destroyers were crowing him on all sides. He was fully engaged with Fenel’s *Resolute* while two other destroyers had begun pounding either flank. His last two frigates had fought valiantly against Bovark’s *Carida Fire* but both had finally burst under withering fusillades. Now that destroyer, too, was drawing near. All the while the interdictor cruiser that held him over Anaxes sat at the garrison world’s south pole, well clear of the battle itself.

No one was calling to ask for surrender. Stazi would never beg, and he doubted Fenel would oblige if he did. He racked his brain for something to say to Captain Rou and *Inviolable*’s crew, but nothing came to him. He was good at inspirational speeches, not apologies, and it was the latter he owed now. In his eagerness to strike Fenel he’d allowed himself to be drawn into this trap. In his arrogance he’d assumed he could fight his way out of one. But now, finally, the day seemed to have come when he’d walked into his last battle.

The only thing he could think to do was command engines to

full and ram *Resolute*. He would take Fenel with him, but right now that felt like a petty act of vengeance. He should have accomplished more here.

But because it was the only option left, Stazi opened his mouth to call Captain Rou. Before he got a sound out he marked three new lights on the tactical holo: bright yellow arrowheads. His heart fell deeper as he waited for the ship's computer to identify them as hostiles and turn them red, but the original color stayed.

When he got to the tactical station Stazi asked the lieutenant, "What are those ships? Can we get an identification?"

"It just came through, sir. That lead ship is the *War Hammer*."

Stazi dared hope. As he hurried to the comm station he called, "Get Admiral Yage on the line! Now!"

"We've just got something from him, sir," the officer reported. "It's a broadcast, sir, going out on all frequencies."

"Put it on."

The deck kept shaking and alarms kept wailing as Stazi leaned over the console to see the flickering holo-image of Rulf Yage. The man stood straight with hands clasped at his back, looking the perfect Imperial as he said, "This is Admiral Yage of the *War Hammer*, acting in accordance with the stated intention of the Galactic Federation's proper leadership, the elected senate and the late Empress Fel. I am commanding an immediate cease-fire between all parties."

Those Jedi on Coruscant must have succeeded in their mission. Stazi felt faint with relief, but he knew the battle wasn't over until the guns stopped firing. Right now *Inviolable* was still trembling from attacks on all sides and its remaining shields barely held.

"Try hailing *Resolute*," he told the comm officer. "Get me Fenel."

"I'll try sir."

With shaking, nervous hands, the officer punched in a line to the ship dead ahead of them. *Resolute* had taken a lot of damage itself, and Stazi prayed the other admiral would want to save his own hide, if nothing else.

Yet when Fenel's image appeared the man's expression was haughty and imperious, just like always. "Count yourself

lucky, Stazi," he sneered. "Yage's arrival has made me generous. I'll stop firing if you agree to unconditional surrender."

"If I surrender to anyone it will be Yage. *He's* the one acting on behalf of the *real* government, not a usurper."

"Rebel lies. Yage has disgraced his uniform by falling for them."

"He's bringing three destroyers to this fight. That makes it a lot closer to even."

"By the time his ships get here, yours will already be destroyed," Fenel grinned. "So again, I'll let you surrender. If you don't, you'll die."

Stazi wanted to shout defiance and close the signal, but he held back. His brashness had gotten *Inviolable* into this mess. A little more would kill everyone aboard. He had no idea if Fenel's offer was good- quite likely it wasn't- but to flat-out reject it would be to condemn his crew to pointless death.

And if Yage was right, and the senate really had wrested control from Chalk, surrender might be just a short setback before he was returned to his rightful place as leader of the Federation.

Stazi took a deep breath and said, "All right. I surrender."

"Say it louder," Fenel smiled.

"I surrender!" Stazi snapped. "All guns, cease firing! Cease firing!"

The crew hesitated, then complied. Within thirty seconds, all of *Inviolable's* guns had stopped. The surrounding three star destroyers stopped their assault as well, and soon an unbelievable calm had settled over the battle zone. Alarms still sounded in corners of the bridge, warning of damage already taken, but at least the ship was intact, the crew alive.

Stazi exhaled and said, "Thank you, Admiral, for showing your honor."

"A rebel terrorist talks of honor?" Fenel shook his head. "This is indeed a strange time. Say it again, Admiral, so I know you're sincere."

Stazi couldn't keep the icy hate from his voice. "Thank you, Admiral Fenel."

"Excellent. I guess you have learned some manners."

The human cut a short gesture, hand over shoulder, and



suddenly the attacks resumed. Laserfire filled the space over Anaxes once more and emerald death poured into *Inviolable's* battered shields.

As the bridge rocked, Stazi grabbed the comm console hard and shouted, "What are you doing! We had a deal!"

"Let it never be claimed I negotiated with terrorists," Fenel said. "Goodbye, Stazi. For what it's worth, you've been a—"

Fenel's head snapped suddenly sideways as he listened to something from his crew. Then fresh static interrupted the transmission. Stazi spun on the tactical station and shouted, "Report! What's happening?"

Captain Rou was already there. "It's Bovark's ships, sir! They're opening fire on Fenel!"

This battle was taking so many turns they'd left Stazi dizzy. He twisted away from the comm station to look through the viewport. With naked eyes he could see Bovark's *Carida Fire* settled in behind Fenel's flagship, raking *Resolute's* damaged port flank with its forward guns. At the same time the other two destroyers that had caught *Inviolable* in a pincer were pulled back and angling to join the attack on *Resolute*.

*Inviolable's* connection with *Resolute* had never been cut off, and when Stazi turned back to the holo he saw a second image had appeared next to Fenel's.

"Looks like *Carida Fire* just turned this into a three-way transmission, sir," the comm officer supplied.

Stazi had already gathered that. The images of Bovark and Fenel were both blurred by static, but it was clear the admiral had turned full verbal fury on the captain.

"This is outrageous!" Fenel shouted. "Cease fire! Cease fire immediately!"

Bovark nodded to an unseen crew member, and the laserfire between his ship and Fenel's stopped. The Nimbanel said, "Admiral Fenel, I'm afraid I have to take you into custody. You've been accused of unlawful actions in association with Hogrum Chalk."

"Chalk is the law!"

"The senate is the law. We received the same transmission Admiral Yage did. We're fulfilling the request of the lawful government- and Empress Fel. If you won't obey the senate you can at least obey your empress."

Fenel looked ready to explode. Through the breaking holo, Stazi could literally hear his teeth gnash. If he weren't so stunned, he'd be enjoying this.

"After all this you've sided with traitors," Fenel growled. "I should have known it would come to this, you alien piece of—"

"You were a soldier of the Empire!" Bovark snapped. "You've been beaten. Accept it with dignity."

Fenel shot him a withering glare, then turned aside and told his crew, "Stand down. All weapons, all shields, power everything down."

"Give the surrender order to all your ships," Bovark insisted. "And lower the interdiction field."

After another murderous look, Fenel gave that order as well. When Stazi saw the artificial gravity well had been dropped his body finally went weak with relief.

Bovark said, "Hold position here, Admiral Fenel. I'll consult with Admiral Yage to see how to proceed."

Fenel didn't argue further. His holo simply winked off, leaving Bovark to face Stazi directly.

"Well," the Duros said, "I believe this makes up for the time you shot me."

"That was making up for the time you stabbed me." Bovark's jowls twitched in a smirk. "This was simply doing my duty."

"Then it's true? You got word from the senate?"

"Everyone got word from the senate. It was sent out on a FNB broadcast. The signal's been cut, naturally..."

"So Chalk is still at Coruscant."

"I believe so. Don't be hasty, Admiral. Your ship is in poor shape."

"I'm aware." Alarms were still sounding and smoke lingered in the air. "Regardless of who owed whom... Thank you, Captain."

"Thank me for nothing. This isn't over yet."

Stazi nodded. "As long as Chalk is free, he's still a danger."

"I know. But don't go rushing off, Admiral." Bovark's jowls moved again, smiling. "For once, let someone *else* save the galaxy."

With a flick of the arm, the Wookiee sent the closest two stormtroopers flying into the air. Their armor cracked hard

against the corridor's metal wall before they dropped like dolls. Two more troopers came from the other side, but a flash of gold lightsaber sheared off the barrels of their weapons. Two great hands grabbed the closest trooper by the arms, picked him off his feet, and smashed him into his partner. Both soldiers spilled cross the floor and went still.

Karrashchakkuk made it look effortless. For Kyra it was harder; she was focused on defending, and she had to keep careful stock of Jariah and Deliah behind her as she spun her lightsaber to catch and deflect incoming laserfire. Yet the Force flowed through them all, and two behind her pumped shot after shot around her blazing white fan, taking down stormtroopers until the corridor was still and littered with white.

From further down the hall, K'Kruhk called, "Report!"

"We've got three down," said Neuro. The Skrilling commando stood up from the body of a soldier Kyra didn't recognize. "They're not messing around anymore. Only using kill shots."

"All the more reason to get it moving," said Jariah. "We're close, aren't we? It feels close."

"He's close," Kyra agreed, rasping. Eli felt only a few hundred meters away.

Shado said, "I think I know this part of the palace. There's a large gathering hall in here. Chalk might have turned it into a command center."

"I don't feel a lot of people, though," said Kyra. "Just Eli and Chalk.... Mostly Eli."

Karrash shook his head. He didn't like any of this.

"I think I know a second route into that meeting hall," Shado offered.

"Then we split up and take it from either side," K'Kruhk said.

It took less than a minute for Shado to muster a group. Karrash went with him, as did Asaak and several commandos. As they backtracked to their different route, Kyra felt her discomfort grow. Her company felt smaller now, more vulnerable. That had been their third skirmish since meeting the other Jedi on the landing zone, and every time the Force had warned them and helped them dispose of their attackers.

Despite that they were still taking losses, and she was sure that whatever forces Eli and Chalk had guarding them would wear them down further.

As they started forward again, Jariah grunted, "You know what I wish?"

Kyra realized that was directed toward her. "What?"

"I wish we had Ania's droid buddy with us. He'd be a huge help. I'd bet anything Chalk's got a *grancha* load of droids in that hall."

That had occurred to her too. It would explain the lack of Force-signatures around him. "Well, A-gee's still in pieces. It's just us now."

"We shoulda gone off with Astraal," Deliah whispered. "They had speeder bikes just waiting for us to ride clear on. But no, we had to act like *stoopa* heroes."

"Yeah, well, blame Cade," said Jariah. "Y'know this is all his fault..."

Kyra smiled, just a little. Despite their complaints they were here, and actions said more than words.

There was greater action up ahead. After burning through a door they started down a new corridor. This one was empty, and at the end they turned a corner into a long straight hall. She felt they were very near now. They held position and waited for several long, silent minutes until Shado touched them in the Force, telling them he was in position as well.

Before making the final charge, Kyra dared stretch out for Eli, one last time. She found all of him and none of Chalk. This time he responded to her touch; she felt his frustration and anger rise to the point of boiling. He seemed on verge of panic.

And then he touched her back. With the strength and clarity of a shout, he told her to stay away. His warning was loud and desperate and seemed honest; she had no idea what to make of it.

Behind her Jariah grunted, "Well? We gonna do this thing or not?"

"Hold up," she whispered and raised one hand. Her eyes were locked on that door on the far end. She felt Eli draw close, mentally and physically, and right before the door opened she shouted, "Get back! Back!"

The door burst. One young man in black, bearing a scarlet

lightsaber, charged toward them. Stormtroopers surged in behind him, shoulders cracking shoulders as they jostled into the hall and opened fire.

As soon as they did, Eli stopped. Stuck midway down the corridor, equidistant from either group, he spun on his heel and batted back the stormtroopers' blasts with fast wrist-flicks. Then he summoned a burst of Force-energy that threw them back toward the door.

And, just as fast, he turned back to the Jedi and charged. Kyra didn't understand what was happening but she was closest to him, and she hefted her lightsaber to catch his first downward blow. Red crackled on white; Eli rebounded a step back and Kyra swiped. He snapped back from the hips to dodge, then pushed her lightsaber far to her left side, knocking her off-balance. She tried to bring it back in front of her torso but Eli fell forcefully into her. Their chests collided, their heads cracked together, and both of them fell to the floor. Above them, laserfire cut across the hall again as the stormtroopers resumed firing at the still-standing Jedi.

Kyra's lightsaber was still pinned to her side but she snapped an elbow into Eli's temple. He rolled halfway off her and she tried to push him fully away.

"What the hells are you *doing*?" she snapped over the constant crackle of laserfire.

Eli's response was to raise his free hand, snap his fingers, and send out a single pulse through the Force.

The explosion that followed was deafening. Debris fell into Kyra's face, blinding her, and when she tried to writhe to her feet, Eli was no longer on her. She rolled to her stomach and pushed herself up, keeping her lightsaber in hand the entire time. Her left sleeve was free of ash and she used it to wipe dirt off her face, but when she tried to breathe deep she choked on a lungful of dust. All the while, a high ringing erased all sounds.

Dazed and deaf, Kyra spun in a circle, taking in what she could with her eyes and the Force. The whole middle portion of that hallway had collapsed, choking the area with debris and sealing off the end with the stormtroopers. At the same time, everyone who'd been on her end seemed to be uninjured. Deliah and Jariah were hacking up dirt and K'Kruhk's fur was

caked in gray dust, but nobody seemed afflicted by serious injuries.

Kyra was trying to puzzle out what had happened when she saw Neuro haul Eli upright by the collar and drag him around the corner to a clear section of the hall. Kyra pushed her way through the dazed crowd, once slamming her shoulder hard into the wall to squeeze past.

When she turned the corner Neuro had his prisoner held up and pinned to the wall, green hands crushing Eli's chest while his feet dangled centimeters from the floor. Kyra shouted, "Wait!" and was surprised to hear her own voice.

Neuro looked to her without releasing Eli. "This is him, isn't it? Chalk's boy?"

Kyra saw Eli trying to speak despite the pressure on his lungs. She snapped, "Let him go. *Now!*"

An added touch of Force-suggestion did the trick. Neuro let Eli fall hard on the floor. He stayed there, looking up at Kyra's white saber-blade through a mess of black hair in his face.

"You saved us, didn't you?" she said. "Why?"

"It doesn't matter *why*," Eli scowled as he pulled strands from his eyes. "This was a trap!"

"Yeah, we kinda figured that much," grunted Neuro, who'd hefted a blaster rifle in one hand.

Kyra was aware of K'Kruhk coming around the corner toward them. Eli's eyes locked on the Whiphid for a moment, then swung back to her. "There's a hundred and fifty storm-troopers in that room! They have ysalamiri to shield them!"

"Stang," Neuro said, then ducked away and fished out his comlink to warn Shado's group, though Kyra was sure he'd felt it in the Force already.

She and K'Kruhk crowded over Eli. The hall had almost gone quiet, save for coughs and shifting rubble. Still sitting on the floor, he looked between them.

Voice cracked and pleading, he said, "I was supposed to lure you in, but I saved you."

"We get that." Kyra wasn't in a thankful mood. Her ears still rang; the headache was savage. She wanted to know what had changed between the fight on Zonama and now, but even that was a secondary concern. She asked, "Is Chalk still in there with his guard?"

"No, no, no." Eli shook his head savagely. "You don't get it. Chalk's not in there. He was *never* there." He looked straight at her, imploring. "He's been on the *Jagged Fel* all this time."

Reversal piled on reversal until Hogrum felt smothered. It was like the entire damned Force had marshalled to act against him.

"I can't explain it, sir," Lieutenant Nexel's voice buzzed on his comlink. "Somehow Agent Horn trigged all the explosives at once. We're trapped in here, sir, and we can't get to the Jedi."

"What about Horn? Is he alive?"

"I don't know, sir. As I said—"

"Yes, I understand. Get out of there and go after them, Lieutenant. Blow a hole in the damned ceiling if you have to."

Hogrum tapped his comm off, exhaled sharply, and looked to the nearest holo. The scene over Anaxes had gone perfectly still. In a cruel inversion of what it had been just minutes ago, Admiral Fenel's star destroyer was now the one walled on all sides. Yage and Bovark had shown their true colors and Hogrum would make them pay for it somehow.

Elsewhere, the rebels' hit-and-run attacks had stopped. On Hogrum's personal order, the attack against Slossar at Sluis Van was still ongoing, but the rest of the scattered bursts of warfare had stopped. It all came down to that damned FNB broadcast. His people had managed to scramble the transmission, but not before the entirety of Marasiah's last message had been played.

Hogrum had foreseen his enemies' plans but failed to spot that one element, and because of it everything was on the verge of falling down.

He had to plan for the worst. Stazi, Yage, and Bovark were just a short lightspeed jump from Coruscant, and the *Jagged Fel* had only modest accompaniment above the capital; the rest of the defense fleet had been drawn off to fight other attacks. He'd already learned that the nergon-14 charges he'd ordered placed at the base of the first senate tower had been disabled, probably by the same Jedi team that had wrangled cooperation from Brighton and Eldon. Thankfully, there were some things even they had missed.

Hogrum took a breath and thumbed his comlink back on. "This is Command Grek-Six-Two," he said.

The reply was immediate. "Besh-Seven-Niner, standing by."

"Detonate cluster three. Do it in one minute."

"Confirmed. Executing."

Hogrum pocketed the comlink, breathed again, and stepped for the door. He emerged from the dark of Captain Worgaan's quarters and went straight to the bright bridge. As soon as he stepped on the command deck every eye turned to him. He'd braced himself for accusation or shock, even hatred, but their eyes were simply expectant.

He found Worgaan standing the communications station and gave the man a tiny nod. Worgaan nodded back. As ordered, he'd kept the *Jagged Fel* on a communications blackout which had prevented the senators' broadcast from reaching the ears of its crew. In their eyes he was still their rightful ruler who'd taken power after the tragic murder of his niece.

Hogrum would need that lie and more for what lay ahead. He stepped across the deck to the forward viewport and looked down on Coruscant. The *Jagged Fel* was keeping a high-altitude orbit on the edge of the planet's gravity well, with the aim of reacting quickly if any rebel ships appeared over the capital. From this range Coruscant appeared as a full circle, split exactly down the middle with night-black on one side and metallic gleam on the other.

He concentrated on the black space, trying to find the cluster of artificial light that marked Galactic City itself. He located the spot just as a single massive fireball appeared, expanded, and died.

That set off the crew. The tactical officer reported, "Captain, Regent, we've picked up an explosion from the planet. It must have been Galactic City's shield generator. Its defenses are all down."

Surprise and panic rippled across the bridge. Smoothly, Hogrum said, "Take us in lower. Drop us into geosynchronous orbit over the effected zone."

The crew hurried to comply. Coruscant grew larger, until its circle overflowed the frames of the viewport, and still it continued to expand. Hogrum's agents had placed twice as many nergon-14 charges at the base of the shield generator as



they had beneath the senate tower, and while distance and darkness hid the damage, he was sure the scale of devastation was massive.

Even then, it could be just a pretext of what was to come. That was up to his enemies. As the *Jagged Fel* drew closer to the capital city, closer to firing range, he promised them he would not go quietly.

Gunner Yage had come to Anaxes expecting anything, including a savage battle with Admiral Fenel's forces. She'd been prepared for Imperial killing Imperial and was shocked when the situation had been resolved without additional bloodshed. Despite her father's assurance that Fenel was standing down, she couldn't shake the feeling that something would still go wrong.

"You're getting paranoid, Lead," Rimmon chided her as their TIE Predators flew a loose patrol circuit around *Inviolable*. Gar Stazi's new flagship had taken a beating but had enough engine power to pull away from Anaxes and sidle next to *War Hammer*. Captain Bovark's ships stayed close to the planet, keeping Fenel's *Resolute* pinned in low orbit.

Clearly, Gunner wasn't the only one who didn't trust this cease-fire. She told Rimmon, "Anything could still happen. I heard the fighting at Sluis Van's still going."

"Long way from here."

"Coruscant is still under lockdown, unless you've heard differently. Nobody knows where Chalk is..." She shook her head. "This isn't over, Nine."

His overdramatic sigh crackled in her headset. "You know, it's a good thing you can fly, Lead, because your inspirational skills leave a lot to be desired."

"If you've got a problem, take it up the chain of command."

"Oh, *that*'ll work. You know, Boss, I think--"

He was interrupted by a high-priority hail from *War Hammer*. Gunner cut off Rimmon and opened the channel, expecting the familiar cool voice of the flight control. Instead it was her father in her ear.

"Skull Lead, bring your squadron back to *War Hammer* immediately," Rulf said.

She nudged her TIE into a sharper turn and saw her father's

star destroyer lighting its engines bright. "Understood. Admiral, what's going?"

"We need to get to Coruscant right away. Get aboard now or we'll have to leave you behind."

"But Fenel—"

"Bovark will handle him. *Hurry*, Gunner."

The line shut off. Only when she was stuck in silence did she realized that her father had called her by her first name over an official channel. That drove home urgency as much as anything.

As she piloted a straight line toward *War Hammer* she called Rimmon again and said, "Come on, back to base. We're going to Coruscant."

"Ah, stang," he groaned. "You were right."

"Yes, I hate it too. And don't ask me what's gone wrong, I don't know."

"Fair enough," he said, and his TIE leaped after hers. As they dipped low to access *War Hammer's* ventral hangar, Gunner saw more bright engine-flares from the Mon Cal ship beyond. Despite all the damage his ship had taken, Stazi was ready to plunge into another fight.

"Crazy bastard," she muttered, knowing she was the same kind of mad.

In less than sixty seconds, she and Rimmon joined the other TIEs in their racks aboard *War Hammer*. Three minutes after that, her father's destroyer pivoted and jumped into hyperspace, following the path *Inviolable* had blazed.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

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The hangar that bored thirty meters deep into the side of the palace's executive wing provided a shield against the harshest wind, but not the smell of smoke and burning that drifted on the air. Through its portal Eli could see a red glow on the horizon, not the presage of dawn but embers of the fire that had consumed the shield generator complex.

He stood still and looked at the cityscape, but all around him people were moving. The landing ramp to the three-winged *Sigma*-class shuttle in the middle of the landing deck was open, and the last rebel soldiers and Jedi were piling aboard. The hangar's other craft, a compact RC-2 scout ship, sat neglected on the far corner. It wouldn't be helpful for what they had planned.

More accurately: for what *he* had planned. The hangar was located in a section of the palace only Chalk's most trusted agents had access to, and the shuttle was one of the few with automatic landing clearance for the *Jagged Fel*. That in no way guaranteed that the team of Jedi and commandos would be able to board the regent's ship and capture Chalk, but it was the best hope they had.

When Eli had hastily explained the idea he'd felt skepticism from the others and knew he'd earned it. But because it was their best hope, they'd agreed to his plan anyway. Now that most of them were in the shuttle he couldn't feel them at all, which meant he sensed Kyra all the clearer as she came up behind him.

He turned from the hangar mouth to face her. "Are they ready to go?" he asked.

"They're ready." Kyra stood with one hand near the lightsaber on her belt. Eli had surrendered his own when he'd surrendered himself.

"I'm coming with you," he said. When she didn't agree he snapped, "This was my idea. My plan. I'm not trying to lead you into a trap. I already dragged you *out* of one. You can sense my honesty, can't you? You can feel it."

He opened himself in the Force and poured his emotions to her. In turn he felt some of Kyra's. She was tired, physically and emotionally, but she was ready to go up in that shuttle for a possible suicide mission. Before, when they'd emerged from Rohakalla's hypergate, she'd been resolved to use her new Force powers to right the galaxy's wrongs. He sensed her motivations were humbler this time. She wanted to keep Eli from doing any more damage.

That was fine. He could use someone like that.

She probed him with the Force, skeptical but hoping. There was a call from the landing ramp; the pink Togruta Jedi waved them to join.

Looking straight at Eli, Kyra asked, "Why? Just say it in words."

Sometimes they told truths even the Force couldn't. "If I'd have gone through with it and done what Chalk wanted me to do... It would have been falling back to the dark, and even worse one than what I left behind. I never wanted that. I just wanted the Force to be *gone*."

"It's back again, and more powerful than ever. You can feel that, can't you?"

He nodded gravely. "Because of Skywalker. And Talon."

"Because of a lot of people." Her voice ached. "I get why you threw us out of that trap, but why help us now? If you want the Force gone why side with us over Chalk?"

He looked at the shuttle and saw the Togruta hanging impatiently off a landing strut. Near the door were the handful who'd elected not to come for this mission. K'Kruhk was too valuable to risk; Jariah Syn and Deliah Blue were too sane to join. He felt their judgment on him too.

"Why?" Kyra repeated. She wasn't letting him go without an answer.

"Because the Force *is* back, and if anyone is going to

determine how it's used, I'd rather it be the Jedi than Chalk. That man is.... black at the core."

She tilted her head. "You could have decided that *before* we fought on Zonama."

"I wasn't thinking clearly," he muttered.

"You've never thought clearly." Her smile was sharp, twisted. "But what the hell. Maybe you're starting to."

He hoped so but didn't say it. Kyra turned and jogged toward the shuttle. Eli watched her for one second, then followed. The Togruta stared at him as he came up the ramp but didn't block his passage. As soon as Eli stepped inside the Force winked to nothing. They'd recovered one live ysalamir to take with them; right now the yellow, furry creature snaked around the shoulders of a big Skrilling commando who looked very uncomfortable. The creature's Force-repelling bubble made certain Chalk wouldn't sense their presence as they approached the *Jagged Fel*. It was better to be safe than sorry.

A *Sigma*-class shuttle was a simple ship, with a boxy main hold and short umbilical hallway connecting to the cockpit. One of the rebel commandos was about to slip into the chair but Eli insisted, "I will do it."

He got glares as he sat down but ignored them as he began preflight checks. Hovering over his shoulder, Kyra asked, "Do you know approach and landing procedures for *Jagged Fel*?"

"I do. That's why you should let me handle it. I'll drop us in the secondary hangar. From there I'll direct you to the bridge."

"It's a long way to go with just a dozen fighters," said the commando he'd displaced.

"Well," he muttered, "it's a good thing we have Jedi with us." To his mild surprise, Eli meant it.

A minute later the shuttle pushed up on its repulsors, then fired engines and soared out of the hangar. As they climbed skyward the wash of destruction left by the shield generator's destruction smoldered behind them, a bright scar on a dark cityscape. Above them the sky was starless, and beyond the sky was Chalk's flagship, waiting.

As if in protest of the wrenching maneuvers it had been forced to take, *Inviolable* shuddered when exiting hyperspace over Coruscant. The scent of smoke still clung to the air but the

alarms on the bridge had been stopped, their problems addressed. The silence allowed Stazi and his crew to face what lay ahead with scraps of confidence.

The situation was clear as soon as they left hyperspace, but Stazi still waited by the tactical station for the full sensor reading to come in. The *Jagged Fel* had dropped into low orbit over Galactic City, which now lay unprotected after the destruction of its shield generators. There was no telling how much damage had already been done by the explosive detonation. Chalk's star destroyer was old but powerful, and from that position it could easily obliterate the senate complex or any other target. A half-dozen smaller frigates sat in upper orbit above it, walling off the regent's flagship.

From its current position at the edge of Coruscant's gravity well, *Inviolable* had no change of stopping Hogrum Chalk from doing whatever he pleased.

When they'd made their hurried jump from Anaxes, Stazi had known they'd never get here in time, but he'd given the order anyway. The capital was under threat, the senators at risk. To do nothing would betray his first and ultimate oath as an Alliance officer, and as Federation triumvir.

Yet as *Inviolable* hung in high orbit he stared at the tactical holo and felt hollow dread in his stomach. He simply didn't know what to do.

Company came moments later, when all three of Rulf Yage's star destroyers dropped out of hyperspace near *Inviolable*. The human admiral took stock of the scene quickly and began spreading his ships apart so they might engage Chalk's frigates from multiple angles.

At the same time, he put out a holo-broadcast that Stazi and the rest of *Inviolable*'s crew watched from the bridge. "This is Admiral Rulf Yage of the Federation Navy," he said, looking every bit the proper officer and not a quasi-mutineer. "I've come to Coruscant in response to request for help from the legitimate government of the Federation, the elected senate. I will do everything in my power to protect the senate and Galactic City from danger. I call on the *Jagged Fel* and all ships defending it to stand down and resolve this situation peaceably. There is nothing to gain by fighting and everything to lose."

It was a nice effort, but it yielded nothing. Stazi imagined that the frigates had been instructed to ignore all hails, as had the crew of the *Jagged Fel*. Nonetheless, in seeing Yage's ships edge closer, those officers would know how high the stakes were, and how close they stood to disaster. He thought he could even *feel* their indecision, as though the Force really was speaking to him.

If it was, it didn't have a damn thing to say about resolving this standoff. He was starting to understand why Jedi were so annoyingly cryptic.

Stazi waited for two tense minutes after Yage's broadcast before getting a response. The transmission was direct from the *Jagged Fel* and when they opened it the image of Hogrum Chalk appeared above the comm console.

Draped in black robes, scarred head held defiantly high, the regent said, "To all Federation vessels, this is Hogrum Chalk. I stand before you now in defiance of the insidious coup attempt orchestrated by rogue members of the military. In defiance of the constitution and in league with treasonous senators, they have destroyed the shield generator and laid Galactic City vulnerable to attack.

"I will stand firm against it to protect the people of Coruscant from another vile assault. Those who come closer will be repelled. Any damage to befall the surface of our great capital will be solely the fault of the traitors who have attacked it. I beg them to stop this hideous violation on their own government. If they persist, I will be forced to stop them with any means necessary. *They* will be held responsible for all blood spilled today. I hope knowing that will give them pause."

The holo winked out. Stazi's empty feeling grew; Chalk had just solidified his upper hand.

When *War Hammer* called, Yage was ready to speak to Stazi directly. The human told him, "That was a threat if I've ever heard it. If we move in for an attack he'll be able to burn all of Galactic City before we get there."

"We can't let him do that. And we can't surrender either."

"If you have a suggestion, Admiral, I'd love to hear it."

Stazi didn't. It made him so angry he wanted to punch the console. After everything- his escape from prison, the stand-off at Zonama, the complicated raids and his near-death at Anaxes-

he'd been stopped above Coruscant itself.

There was nothing he could do; Chalk's position was superior. He growled, "I won't surrender. I *can't*. We hold position here."

"Chalk might call for backup. We'll be trapped."

"I won't surrender Coruscant and I won't let him destroy the senate. Will you?"

Yage's blunt face twisted. "No."

"Then we wait," Stazi said. "And hope for a miracle."

The underside of the *Jagged Fel* was a white wedge growing steadily to fill their viewport. It was hard not to stare at it as Eli piloted the shuttle closer. Though he couldn't yet see them with his naked eyes, he knew the hull was dotted with turbolaser cannons, all of them surely trained on targets below. Some banks were surely aimed at the senator towers, others at the palace complex, justice center, or other facilities. The *Jagged Fel* sat ready to rain down hell on the capital. The only reason it hadn't, Eli reasoned, was that Chalk was waiting for his enemies to move closer, so that they might be more easily blamed for his conflagration.

Most unsettling of all was the knowledge that some of those guns might be trained on their small shuttle.

As they drew closer and closer, anxious silence filled the cockpit. No sound came from the hold behind them either. Kyra was the one to break it when she whispered, "I really, *really* wish I had the Force right now."

Eli understood. It might give them some hint of what lay ahead, but to touch it would risk alerting Chalk to their approach. So they sailed onward, blocked from that vital power by the ysalamir in the hold.

Despite spending the past three years desperately trying to keep the Force silent, Eli discovered that right now he'd give anything to hear it.

A light on the shuttle's comm board came on. The Togruta Jedi, Asaak Dan, said, "It's flight control. They're asking if we plan to land."

"Send the clearance code I gave you," Eli said. "Tell them we're bringing supplies and personnel up from the palace."

"You got it," Asaak muttered and typed a response into the



keypad. He didn't need the Force to convey his skepticism of the whole enterprise.

As the *Jagged Fel* filled the whole viewport, Eli began to count the turbolaser batteries dotting the smooth white hull. None of them seemed to be trained on the shuttle, but he couldn't be sure. He heard a sharp inhalation behind him and looked over his shoulder. Kyra stood behind his chair, clasping the back hard, holding her breath as they waited for reply.

Heartbeats were long and heavy. After uncounted, excruciating seconds, the comm board lit up and Asaak leaned in to read.

"Message received," he sighed. "We've got clearance to land."

They weren't coming at him, but they weren't pulling back and wouldn't surrender. It was the standoff Hogrum had expected and he only hoped it would last. There was no guarantee of that; Stazi was infamously unpredictable and Rulf Yage, beneath his stalwart Imperial façade, had repeatedly shown himself capable of surprises.

Standing near the tactical station, watching the four hostile warships hovering outside of firing range, he asked, "What's the time of arrival for the Fresia task force?"

An ensign checked his board. "Thirty-four minutes, sir."

That was a long time to wait. Once the backup force arrived it would surround Stazi and Yage and force them to surrender or die. After that, Hogrum could begin deploying more troops across the capital. The senators would have to be kept in lockdown, the emergency orders extended indefinitely. Eli Horn and the Jedi would be hunted and killed. The populace would be roused and confused but he'd find a way to make them pliant, as he'd done before.

It was still possible to win this. Hogrum reached out with the Force, that hated but useful tool, and tried to get a sense from the ships beyond. He picked up faint uneasiness from Stazi's and Yage's ships; they knew he had the upper hand and were afraid to act. The crew in his protecting frigates were nervous but remained in place. They truly believed they were holding back a rebellious assault on the capital.

For the *Jagged Fel*'s crew, the situation was more

complicated. Captain Worgaan was keeping the communications blackout alive, and he'd quietly relayed orders to the weapons crew to take manual command of the ventral turbolasers and select targets on the surface. Most of them had balked at shooting on Galactic City, and Worgaan had explained that those locations- the senate towers, the palace complex, the administrative buildings, the justice center- were suspected hiding places for the enemy. As he'd done so, Hogrum had reached out with the Force to massage his words into the minds of the weapons crew, erasing rational doubts.

There were, he admitted, upsides to that power after all. He might never control it, but he could at least use it against lesser minds.

The bridge was tense as the standoff continued. Hogrum walked slow circles around the bridge, black cape trailing on the floor, boots clacking steadily on hard tile. As he passed the starboard crew pit he picked up mutters from the officers; with the bridge this quiet they were easy to hear.

"Code checks out," a lieutenant said. "Lower shields and let them land."

"Yes, sir," said an ensign at his board.

Hogrum stared into the pit. "Who is coming aboard my ship?"

The lieutenant looked up, blinked surprise, and stammered, "A shuttle, sir. From the surface. Designation code one-seven-eight-niner-besh, sir."

That was one of the craft assigned to Nexel's use. As best Hogrum knew, the lieutenant was still digging his way out of the partially-collapsed palace.

"Hold that ship!" he snapped. "Lock tractor beams! Keep it from entering!"

The lieutenant hesitated but the ensign worked faster. He punched commands into his console and reported, "Tractors holding, sir. What should we do?"

Hogrum closed his eyes and reached out with the Force. He groped past the thousands of lives packed into the *Jagged Fel* and searched for ones trapped just beyond. He fully expected to feel Eli among them, now gone over to his enemies. He should have killed the brat the second he'd returned. There were likely Jedi aboard, perhaps K'Kruhk himself, all coming to capture or kill him. Only Force-users would be so arrogant as to try to

fight through the entire length of a star destroyer; only Force-users might succeed.

Yet when he explored the space beneath the *Jagged Fel* he felt nothing. No Eli, no Jedi, not even the dully professional minds of Nexel's stormtroopers. There was simply a void.

Either that ship was set on auto-pilot and loaded with explosives, or those aboard were cloaking themselves with an ysalamir. Likely the latter- a bomb was too callous for Jedi- but it didn't matter either way. There was only one response.

"Keep a tractor lock on that shuttle," he said. "Weapons, fire on the ship and destroy it. Leave no survivors."

The moment the tractor beam froze them before the gaping hangar mouth, Kyra knew they were in trouble.

"Your damn passcode didn't take!" snapped Asaak.

Eli's face had gone slack in horror. "No. It must have been Chalk."

"Who *cares*?" Kyra leaned in between them. "Shields up! Does this thing have weapons?"

Eli slapped the button to raise defenses. "Yes. Two heavy lasers canons. Asaak-"

"I've got them." The Togruta put hands on his control panel. "What do we shoot at?"

"Anything!" Kyra shouted, just before the first turbolaser bolt slammed into their shields.

The vise-grip of the tractor beam was the only thing that kept the ship from being violently thrown. Kyra still struggled to stay on her feet, and grasping the back of Eli's chair she called, "Shoot! Shoot!"

Asaak shot. His canons sprayed red laserfire into the mouth of the hangar. They were already inside the shield perimeter, so their shots succeeded in tearing clear through the hull, creating gouges of flame. Another blast hit their shields, knocking Kyra to the wall and twitching Asaak's constant spray of laserfire in a new direction. This time his bolts splashed across the tractor beam projector. A skimming shot was enough to interrupt the fragile device and the invisible hand that had been squeezing them disappeared.

Eli wrenched them away from the hangar before another tractor beam could lock on. Ventral turbolaser turrets, until

now trained on surface targets, slowly wrenched to fire at them. Eli flew them close to the *Jagged Fel*'s underbelly, and its white superstructure passed so close overhead Kyra was afraid they'd smack into it.

Asaak was still firing random sprays of plasma, some of which were splattering ineffectively on the destroyer's energy screens.

"Those shields are still up," the Togruta squawked. "And we're trapped *inside*."

"I'm heading for the aft generator now," Eli said as he cut a straight line across the hull. A blue corona of thruster-glow awaited them at the end. "It's coming up on your left. Can you see it?"

Asaak leaned forward, hands still on gun controls, and squinted at the superstructure rushing by. "I think I see it."

"Then shoot it when we pass!"

He snarled, "I really wish I had the Force right now!"

Still clinging to Eli's chair, Kyra dropped to a crouch to prevent being thrown by the maneuver. He jerked them to port and dipped their nose to the hull, giving Asaak the fraction of a second he needed to release his laser blasts. They speared directly into the boxy protrusion of the shield generator and vaporized it in an instant. Asaak kept firing madly, leaving flaming geysers with every hole he punched in the hull. Kyra had no idea what kind of equipment a star destroyer packed this close to its engines, and she was about to shout a warning when a blindingly-bright explosion filled the space ahead.

Kyra had enough time to think *this is it* before the brightness cleared. Stars swept across the viewport as Eli wrestled with the controls. Coruscant's night side panned into view and she realized they were still flying.

"What the hells did we hit?" she called.

"I have no idea," Asaak admitted, almost smiling.

Eli was scowling hard. His infiltration plan had utterly failed and they might not make it out alive. He jerked and juked them as he flew toward the planet while fat green turbolaser bolts whipped past.

Kyra was about to tell him risk a straight run when a shot landed. It broke failing shields and sent the entire ship into a spin. Coruscant spun outside the viewport, then tumbled away.

Kyra felt her stomach lurch as artificial gravity buckled and failed. Alarms screamed. Shouts rebounded from the hold behind them.

This, she thought, was a time when they really, *really* could use the Force.

As Coruscant kept slipping, getting further away, she asked, "Can you get us under control?"

Instead of responding, Eli continued to wrestle with the throttle. He killed power to the damaged engine and their spin started to slow. Kyra began to feel relief when Asaak announced, "Sensors are back! We have TIEs incoming!"

"Tell me we can fight them," Kyra pleaded.

"No," Eli moaned. He looked back at her with apology in his eyes. "Shields are down. We're going to have to abandon ship."

From *Inviolable's* distance, the disturbance at the *Jagged Fel* first registered as the energy discharge of a few turbolasers. The moment Captain Rou notified him Stazi's heart fell; he thought Chalk had actually been mad enough to fire on the planet. But the shots went elsewhere, or so it seemed. *Inviolable's* tactical crew tried to get a better read but events were occluded on the star destroyer's ventral hull. And then they reported a large explosion in the rear, followed by a cascade and power failures along the *Jagged Fel's* underside.

Stazi had no idea what was happening, but he knew a chance when he saw it.

"Attack!" he called. "Engines to full! Forward shields up! Batteries, prepare a firing solution on Chalk's ship. Don't bother with the frigates. Just get us to Chalk!"

The crew complied without hesitation. His energy fed into theirs and theirs into him; the entire ship felt eager as it pushed deeper toward Coruscant and Chalk's flagship. The frigates attempted to intervene, of course, but their initial volleys splashed harmlessly on *Inviolable's* shields. After the battle at Anaxes emergency crews had been working frantically to get defenses to full power; Stazi hoped they'd continue to hold.

Tactical also reported that Yage was springing to action. His three star destroyers were falling toward the *Jagged Fel* at separate angles, forcing the frigates to pull back from

*Inviolable* and head off the other threats. As the ships started exchanging fresh rounds of laserfire, Rou reported, "Sir, we're getting hailed by Yage."

No surprise there. As *Inviolable* continued its plunge toward the *Jagged Fel*, he hurried to the waiting holo-image of the frowning human.

Stazi decided to head off his bad mood. Grinning he said, "Thank you for the assistance, Admiral!"

"Dammit, you don't know what you've started!"

"What *we*'ve started. I know I broke that stalemate. If we can break Chalk now--"

"I know, I know. But if you're wrong, the lives of billions could be on our heads."

"No," he said firmly, "On Chalk's."

It was a pointless argument, especially now. Yage gave single nod and killed the transmission. Stazi spun toward the viewport and peered at the *Jagged Fel*, still out of firing range but getting closer. Yage was dead right; this was a gamble with stakes as high any as he'd wagered in his career.

But Chalk had left him no choice. Stazi had rolled his dice; the only thing left was to see what side came up.

The one upside to the current chaos was that the staff of the Federation News Bureau was able to wrestle back control over their broadcast. Jao wasn't entirely sure how they beat the jamming that was being put out to stifle their transmission, but Warinmos, the Toong'l operations chief, worked her crew hard until they pulled it off.

A great explosion had torn apart the shield generators that protected Galactic City. Power outages were rippling through the metropolis- which, Jao suspected, was what stopped the jamming. FNB headquarters had two backup power generators that allowed them to keep pumping their transmission to sites galaxy-wide, but they now had more to broadcast than just repeats of the senators' message. A battle was being waged in low orbit over the city itself.

Jao was used to being in battle situation rooms, where high-tech sensors and instant communications fed him all the detail he could possibly need about a fight. The FNB headquarters had none of that, but they did have a powerful telescopic holo-

receiver that fed them enhanced images of the fight lighting up a small portion of the night sky. The FNB was currently broadcasting those same images while trying to keep up a running commentary.

Jao and Yalta Val had gained the unlikely job of news reporters. The older Imperial Knight stared hard at the image and spoke into the receiver microphone Warinmos had handed him. "That large white star destroyer is most certainly the *Jagged Fel*. That is the flagship of the regent- I'm sorry, the *usurper*- Hogrum Chalk. I've received word that Chalk is on that ship right now. As for the other ships..." He trailed off. "It's hard to say right now, but that oval-shaped craft appears to be a Mon Calamari cruiser. As you can see, it's charging straight for the *Jagged Fel*, probably aiming for a major confrontation..."

He trailed off again. Jao filled the silence by saying, "Despite that broadcast Chalk sent out ten minutes ago, we have to remind you that *his* is the only ship currently in position to fire on Galactic City. If Coruscant takes damage *he* will be responsible, directly so, even more than when he orchestrated that *last* attack three years ago."

It was hard to keep going on those lines. If Chalk decided to open fire on Coruscant there was no way to stop him. Each turbolaser blast would kill tens of thousands. The FNB's blaring, rebellious broadcast made it a priority target. If they were fired upon, they'd get only a few seconds' warning before hot oblivion.

Val picked up where Jao had left off. "From what we can tell, that Mon Cal cruiser is starting to engage the *Jagged Fel*. Our cameras are picking up those sparks between them. It looks like they're pounding each other's shields. It also looks like that cruiser isn't stopping..."

He was right. The Mon Cal ship seemed to be pulling past the *Jagged Fel* even as they exchanged blows. Suddenly Jao knew what they were doing, and he said, "That ship is dropping altitude! It's placing itself *beneath* the *Jagged Fel*!"

"That's right," added Val. "It's positioning itself as a living shield to stop Chalk from firing on Coruscant. All those flashes we're picking up.... It's looking like the battle's getting even worse..."

The space between the star destroyer and Alliance cruiser would be ablaze with turbolaser bolts and exploding warheads. In that kind of ferocious ship-to-ship combat the weaker one would simply shatter when its defenses broke. Jao knew the *Jagged Fel*; it was old but formidable beyond its years, as a flagship passed down through the Fel dynasty should be.

That Mon Cal cruiser didn't have a chance. Putting itself there was suicidal, and heroically brave. Jao wished he could do more but he was trapped here, so far from the fight. Not even the Force could help. All he could do was share what he saw, and pray.

Alarm-lights flashed, klaxons wailed, and smoke curled visibly through the air of *Inviolable's* bridge. Through the viewport, emerald laserfire from the *Jagged Fel's* ventral cannons fell like rain. The last shuddering energy screens failed to stop them and the plasma-bolts tore vicious holes in the Mon Cal cruiser's elegant hull. The deck beneath Gar Stazi's feet refused to stop shaking. He knew the ship was lost, and there was no place to run.

He'd known that the moment he'd ordered them to drop beneath the *Jagged Fel* and interpose themselves between Chalk and Galactic City. The regent's star destroyer was bigger, better-armed, and hadn't already exhausted itself in another grueling battle. Yet Stazi had given the order anyway; even if they couldn't break Chalk alone they could forestall his attack. They could protect the senators and citizens down below, if only for a little while.

Stazi had hoped for longer. The deck surged beneath him, throwing him into the tactical console. He grabbed the edges to keep from falling and looked at the static-blurred holo. As he'd expected and feared, *Inviolable's* engines were starting to go. Yage's three star destroyers were delivering damage to the frigates but were still held up, unable to give *Inviolable* any aid. It couldn't last much longer.

Stazi hurried over to helm control and grabbed the lieutenant. "How long until we lose all engines?"

The young Pantoran shook his head. "I don't know, sir. We've already lost thrusters two and five. The ship... she just can't *take* it."



He was on verge of total panic. Stazi squeezed his shoulder hard. "What happens when power fails? Can you plot a trajectory? I didn't put us here just to fall out of orbit and crash into the city we're trying to save."

The lieutenant's eyes got wide; he hadn't even thought of that. He typed calculations into his console and his expression fell. "Sir, if we lose thrusters here there's no way we'll maintain steady orbit over the planet."

"I understand. Thank you." He gave that shoulder another squeeze then turned to find Captain Rou. The stout Alanteen was near the weapons station, trying to coax a little more return fire even though their dorsal guns were mostly melted to slag along with the upper half of their hull.

"Captain," Stazi snapped. "If we don't pull up now, we're going to fall into the planet! We can't let that happen!"

Rou gogged at him, then snapped, "There's only one way to go. Chalk will try and block us."

"I know, but it's the only thing we can do."

Moving closer to the *Jagged Fel* meant they'd be torn up all the harder. But if they got *Inviolable* safety far from the planet, their faster end would be worth it.

Rou asked, "Should we attempt a ram, sir?"

"We don't have enough engine power for that. Just get us higher. And if we scrape a little paint off Chalk's hull, so be it."

The captain bobbed his head and hurried to relay orders, as fast as his stubby legs would carry. Stazi looked back to the tactical holo. In between long static-bursts he made out Yage's three star destroyers, pressing ever-closer. In ten, maybe fifteen minutes, they'd have the *Jagged Fel* surrounded.

That was ten minutes too many. He only hoped *Inviolable's* broken, chewed-up hull could continue to shield Galactic City for that long.

The ship surged away from the planet as quickly as it could, propelled by dying engines. Looking up through the domed viewport, Stazi could see the white underside of the *Jagged Fel* get closer and closer. Laser blasts continued to rain down, savaging unshielded hull, spilling streams of debris and curtains of flame into space. Weightless wreckage swirled like hail, and he saw the first white cracks in the viewport.

There seemed little left to do, but the crew kept working frantically to make their last minutes count. Stazi found himself standing beside Captain Rou. He thought of Jhoram Bey and Jaius Yorub, Porat Derrol and all the countless soldiers who'd died fighting under his standard. Even when he'd been locked in prison, totally unaware, they'd fought for him. Fought and died.

He didn't regret this stand, or any of the ones he'd made. Not if it saved Galactic City. He only regretted all the dead soldiers.

Straining his voice over the klaxons, Stazi said, "Captain.... I'm sorry."

Rou looked up at him, blinking big eyes. "No, sir. It's been an honor." His little mouth crooked a smile. "The highlight of my career."

Stazi could feel he meant it. Beneath the crew's frantic effort he felt an underlying pride and a unity of purpose. They'd done their best to the very end and been as brave as any soldier to have gone before. It was something they could take with them into whatever lay ahead. Stazi could take it too.

He looked upward. Emerald rain fell one last time and washed it all away.

From the safe distance afforded by her TIE Predator, Gunner Yage was able to watch both ships as the *Jagged Fel* delivered the final, fatal blows to *Inviolable*. The entire top half of the Mon Cal cruiser had been ripped to black shreds even before it fired its remaining engines and tried to push toward its killer. Gunner understood the intention; *Inviolable* wanted to increase altitude to prevent or at least delay falling into the planet. The *Jagged Fel* did everything to stop it, even twisting ninety degrees to swing its topside starboard batteries toward *Inviolable*.

Against such a massive of missile and turbolaserfire, there was simply nothing *Inviolable* could do. Its engines shuddered and died, massive explosions tore huge gouges in its hull, and escape pods began to shoot out of its intact lower sections. Nothing could save most of the crew; Gunner's keen eyes marked the moment when its entire bridge section disappeared beneath a turbolaser barrage, leaving only a black scar behind.

The sight made her angry. Gar Stazi and *Inviolable*'s crew

had made a mad, desperate, suicidal attempt to save Galactic City. Her father's ships had rushed to help but they'd simply been too late. Even now, as *Inviolable* smoldered, the *Jagged Fel* pulled ahead of its wreckage to bring Coruscant's surface in sight of its cannons yet again.

"All Skulls, on me," she called. "We've got payback to deliver."

She felt her pilots' assent without having to hear it. She shot a straight line toward the *Jagged Fel* without even asking permission from *War Hammer*. All her pilots fell in behind her. There were more friendly TIEs out here and some straggling snubfighters from *Inviolable*, but they wouldn't be enough to take down the *Jagged Fel* by themselves. Her father's star destroyers would be able to do that.

Gunner just wanted to get a few shots in. For the sake of Stazi and *Inviolable*'s crew. For the empress. And in a weird, irrational way, for her brother.

Before she even got close to firing range, new markers appeared on her long-range sensors. She checked them and her heart immediately fell. Four new star destroyers had joined the fight over Coruscant. The lights on her board were stubbornly red, which meant they hadn't come to help. Her father's ships might be able to box in the *Jagged Fel* before the new arrivals got within firing range, but the battle had still turned conclusively in Chalk's favor.

She growled private swears and was about to ask for orders from *War Hammer* when Jae Akura hailed her. "Lead, this is Five," he said. "We've got a ship coming in fast from below. Looks like... an RC-2 scout ship."

She didn't have patience for this. "If it's hostile, kill it."

"Can't tell, Lead. I think- stang, look at 'im go!"

Gunner twisted her fighter and peered down to catch the engine-glow of the Incom scout, bobbing bright and fast against Coruscant's night side. A trio of Chalk's TIEs rushed toward it and the RC-2 met them with a volley of laser blasts. The well-placed shots burst on TIE immediately, winged another, and forced the last to circle around try to run.

Then the RC-2 swung up toward her. Scowling, Gunner attempted to hail. "Unidentified ship, state your business or get the hell out of here."

After a second of silence, a half-remembered voice said, "This ain't Gunn Yage, is it?"

"I said state your business!"

"Oh yeah, I remember that bad attitude." Snark disappeared and his voice went soft. "Sorry Cade couldn't make it."

"Jariah Syn. What are you *doing* here?"

"Flying a rescue mission. I could use some cover."

"Rescue for who?"

"No time to explain. You got my wing or you gonna let your brother's best friend die?"

"That is *not* fair."

"Yeah, what is?"

Without another word, Jariah's RC-2 jumped in front of her, flashed thruster-glow in her face, and surged forward. Gunner swore and flipped back to the Skulls' comm channel. "All fighters, with me! Protect that scout ship!"

"Lead, what's going on?" asked Rimmon.

"I'll tell you when I figure it out. Just *do* it!"

Instead of flinging out some flirty rejoinder he clicked affirmative and followed. They all did, and soon the Skulls had settled on Jariah's flanks or fully outpaced him. They were diving for the space directly above the *Jagged Fel*, and soon they'd come within range of its dorsal turbolasers. That was not a good place to be, and Gunner's heart fell further when she spotted a swarm of TIEs coming at them from dead ahead. Even though they weren't in firing range yet they were spitting out a storm of green plasma, and when she checked her scanners she saw one yellow marker leading them.

She guessed this was the ship they were rescuing. "Okay Skulls," she said, "Clear off the TIEs only. Protect everything else. Go now!"

Her squadron broke formation and rushed past Jariah's ship. As they got close she saw the hostile TIEs were chasing a *Sigma*-class shuttle. Normally tri-winged, its dorsal and portside S-foils had been partially torn off. Smoke trailed from one stuttering engine and it looked like one lucky shot would blow it to bits.

Gunner whipped past it, then curved around to attack the nearest enemy TIE. Her wingmates were right with her, and they were able to pick apart the enemy with fast fire from

different angles. They immediately veered around in search of new prey. The TIEs that had been tailing the shuttle had broken off as well; some were fleeing and others attempted to engage the Skulls. As she went after another hostile, Gunner spotted an escape pod eject from the underside of the shuttle. Jariah's RC-2 immediately swooped in to grab it.

At least some things were starting to make sense. Acting wholly on instinct, Gunner chased down another TIE and burst it with a single shot from behind. She spun back toward Jariah's ship and tried hailing him.

"Your back looks clear," she said, "And you're welcome."

"Yeah, thanks for the help. Keep us safe while we onboard."

Gunner signaled to her pilots, who began to fly a close formation around the RC-2 as it pulled survivors from the bulky escape pod attached to its hull. Beneath them, the *Jagged Fel* was pulling ahead, past the drifting ruin of *Inviolable*. Its forward guns would be able to land shots on Galactic City any minute now. Gunner had no doubt Chalk was capable of wreaking that kind of destruction; she only wondered if he'd choose to do it now. Either way she was stuck sitting here, helpless to prevent the loss of all those lives.

Then she noticed something else. "Where'd that shuttle go? Didn't it offload?"

After a pause Jariah came back, all mirth gone from his voice. "Looks like somebody decided to take one last joyride."

As soon as he felt the shudder of the escape pod's ejection, Eli wrenched the shuttle's controls and drove it downward. The *Jagged Fel*'s topside filled his viewport quickly. From this angle he could see the low command tower, untouched among all the strife. His sensors told him the shields were still up but weakening as a swarm of Crossfires from *Inviolable* bombarded it, seeking recompense for their losses.

Without its passengers aboard, the shuttle was physically lighter and more nimble. More, they'd taken that ysalamir with them, and as soon as it was gone the Force had rushed into Eli, like the breath of life.

In that moment he felt intoxicated. All the hatred for the Force that had fueled him since Rohakalla- indeed, since his father's death- disappeared. With the Force he felt his own

connection to the universe's vast web of life. He knew his place in it, small but important and about to be fulfilled. It wasn't the role he'd wanted, but it was better than the one he'd chosen for himself. The Force gave him that certainty and he didn't fight it. Without regret, he dropped the shuttle into a plunge and raced for the *Jagged Fel*'s bridge.

But as the shuttle dove a voice called behind him, "What are you doing *now*?"

He twisted back and saw Kyra pulling herself into the cockpit. Ruining his plans, even now.

He shouted, "Why are you *here*? You should have gone!"

"Not enough room in the escape pod."

"You could have—"

"You idiot," she snapped. "You want to sacrifice yourself, right? You think that's all you've been doing for three years is give yourself up. Well kark that. It's what *I* did for three years and it wasn't worth it either."

He couldn't believe they were having this conversation as they surged toward the *Jagged Fel*. If it weren't for her blazing presence in the Force he wouldn't believe she was here at all.

Kyra grabbed him by the shoulders and half-wrenched him from the pilot's seat. "You want to know what real sacrifice is? That's what Cade did. It's what the empress and Marin and Ania did. That was necessary. Not this."

"We have to stop Chalk!" He shouted. "*I* have to stop him!"

"I wasn't arguing that part," she said, and shoved him aside. Still on her feet, she leaned over the co-pilot's station and set the forward cannons to automatic fire. At the same time Eli grabbed the throttle and eased them out of the steep dive. They were still falling fast; he aligned the center of the viewport with the heart of the bridge tower and throttled engines to full.

"There, it's done," Kyra said. He grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back to the hold.

Still grabbing to the pilot's chair with one hand, he protested, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

Her expression softened, and for a tiny moment he felt her in the Force, understood her as clearly as he had beyond Rokahalla's gate. He understood the toll of the past three years and all she'd given up because she'd thought it was her destiny. And he knew all the things she'd never get back.

She told him, "At this point I'd settle for saving anybody, even you."

Then she pulled. He let himself be dragged to the hold, where the docking airlock sat nestled in the starboard bulkhead. Eli reached out with the Force and felt the lives inside the *Jagged Fel* surging so close. For a tiny moment he thought he found Chalk among them, a black hole of despairing hate.

Kyra slammed the airlock controls. The seal broke; air rushed loudly into the void.

"Kyra, wait!" he screamed. "I don't have a suit!"

"Me neither," she told him.

The door opened wide and they fell into vacuum's embrace.

The *Jagged Fel* was moving ahead, its bow peeking past the ruins of Gar Stazi's flagship to look down on Galactic City, bright but nervous in its waning night. Above them, the reinforcements from Fresia battled Yage's ships fiercely. The admiral wasn't surrendering and he wasn't backing down. It was amazing how some people showed their true colors.

Hogrum Chalk was about to show his. He knew that and didn't care. The blackness in his heart consumed him; as the *Jagged Fel* pulled clear he walked over to the weapons pit, ready to command the gunners to open fire on Galactic City. If they resisted, he'd gather the Force and compel their obedience. His first target, most definitely, would be the senatorial towers. What his planted explosives had failed to do his turbolasers would. He looked forward to seeing Yage's reaction when his so-called legitimate government vanished in a mile-high fireball.

Before he could give the order, Chalk stopped mid-stride. A mind brushed his, familiar but totally unexpected. He felt it for only a second before it disappeared, short enough to make him wonder if he'd imagined it entirely.

Then Worgaan cried, "Intensify forward firepower! Shoot it down! Shoot it down!"

Chalk turned and looked out the forward viewport. A single red *Sigma*-class shuttle, wings burned off and trailing ribbons of flame, fell from above. Its forward cannons spat constant laserfire. He saw the bolts scatter across the bridge's shields and felt a wash of contempt for Eli Horn; the young man

charged foolishly ahead, determined to die as pointlessly as he'd lived.

And then, a half-second before the shuttle hit shields, its lasers tore through the energy screen. They landed beneath the command deck, throwing sparks in front of the viewport and shirked the deck. The shuttle dove through the bright curtain, a great silhouette that filled the viewport and burst through.

Hogrum Chalk stayed frozen at the center of the bridge. He didn't feel the force of impact, the wash of flame, or the bite of cool vacuum. He didn't feel Eli either, not on that suicidal ship. Understanding flashed just before mind, body, and reluctantly luminous core winked out forever.

They said a human body could last fifteen seconds in the vacuum of space. They said it wasn't the cold that got you but the oxygen; something about way air would burst your lungs from the inside. Kyra couldn't remember all of it. She wished she had. As she tumbled out of the shuttle's airlock she breathed out hard; at the same time she grabbed Eli around the waist, forcing air out of his lungs and pulling him toward her so their bodies tumbled together through the void.

Before ejecting from the doomed ship she'd reached out to Jariah and told him where she was. Just as the door burst she'd felt something from him in turn; encouragement perhaps, or a prayer. It was so strange having to rely on a man she'd never even liked, one who'd once shot her in the chest and poured scorn on the Force itself.

But that didn't matter. The Force was with them both, binding them together. In that unlikely symbiosis their minds and fates joined, and Kyra put her life in his hands.

As she and Eli fell together through the void she knew him clearly in the Force, too, and he knew her. Emotions passed between them until she could no longer tell which was whose. They could have come from either one of them: layered regrets, absolute weariness, awe that the Force could sustain them even now.

Kyra didn't know how long this lasted, or if she was already dead. She didn't *want* to die, but if she could still exist in the Force that would mean something, even if she was no longer wholly herself. Small consolations, the best she'd ever had.



*That's not for you, a gentle voice whispered in her mind. Not release into the Force and not oblivion. You've got a lot of living left to do.*

Kyra heard the bittersweet ache in that voice. More, she knew the feelings attached to it that poured in through the Force.

*Ania, she thought. Are you... real?*

*There's no easy answer to that.*

*But are you in me... or in the Force?*

*Who says it has to be one or the other?*

Kyra didn't care if this was imagined, or if she was already dead. She pleaded, *I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. I should have at least been able to say goodbye but I wasn't, because I thought there was so much else I had to do.*

*There was so much else. Don't be ashamed of what you did and don't regret it, especially not for my sake. I don't want you to live the rest of your life like that.*

*But is this life?*

A new voice, just as recognizable, said, *I sure as hells hope so. We're doing our best to keep you alive, you realize that?*

Cade, she marveled, and felt Eli marvel too.

*Can you really save us?* He spoke in her thoughts, just as clearly as those who'd gone beyond.

*It ain't easy, said Cade. We can't do everything, but we're doing what we can.*

Eli was near to bursting with regret. *I thought I was doing what was best for the galaxy. I thought it needed to be freed.*

*You were wrong, Cade said, but with sympathy.*

*I thought it was for the best! Look at Talon! Looks what she became when she lost the Force! She was something better than she'd ever been as a Sith.*

*Yeah, but it wasn't 'cause she lost the Force, Cade corrected. Talon died the way she did because she was striving toward it, not falling away.*

Bitter realization. Rueful shame, but also gratitude to have it clear at last. The emotions were Eli's and they were Kyra's. It was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended as they fell through timeless void.

*Don't feel so bad, Ania told them. This Force thing... it's a fountain of surprises.*

All those emotions started to dwindle. The void closed

around them on all sides, darkness and cold deeper than anything in the Force. Together Eli and Kyra asked, *Are we really alive?*

They waited for an answer, but Cade and Ania were silent. With silence came dread; without the Force as protection it seemed like the void had already claimed them.

But then, the herald of life. Sharp pain shot up Kyra's face, or maybe Eli's. Maybe both. Eyes fluttered open, painful again. Figures were bent over them, too blurry to see. Overhead lights, so bright. Kyra (she was sure she was herself now, physically separate from Eli but so close to him in the Force) made out Deliah Blue's colorful body bend over hers and attach an oxygen mask to her face.

Pure air raked her lungs. That hurt too and she cried joyfully for the pain. Kyra was too weak to roll her head but she felt Eli beside her, breathing new air, rejoicing at the pain of living.

*We did what we could*, Ania told her.

And Cade said, *The rest is over to you*.

Kyra and Eli didn't understand what they'd meant. Lying on the deck of the rescue ship they groped for answers but their brief eternity was over; Ania and Cade were gone.

Still linked, their minds reached out. The web of the Force that connected all the souls packed onto this shuttle spread further. They felt the TIE fighter pilots flying tight escort and other ships jumping frantically around. They felt the mass of life aboard the *Jagged Fel* as it hurtled toward its doom. Horror took them both as the meaning of Cade's final words became clear.

With its command tower destroyed, the *Jagged Fel* had lost control over its failing engines. Drawn in by Coruscant's gravity, its nose had been tugged into the drifting wreckage of *Inviolable*. The two massive warships grinded together, one already dead and the other fast dying. Fires burst and died as their metal hulls scraped and tore. Oxygen ignited, burning trapped crew alive. And the worst horror was yet to come.

As wrapped-together as Kyra and Eli had been, the *Jagged Fel* and *Inviolable* began to tumble toward Coruscant. The nearer they got the harder gravity pulled, and the massive warships started to drop toward the unprotected, unshielded cityscape below. Some of their million tons of metal would

disintegrate in the atmosphere, but they were so massive nothing would stop them entirely except for collision with the ground. The potential damage was too horrible to calculate; miles and miles of Galactic City could be vaporized on impact, killing billions, with billions more to die from the succeeding groundquakes wrought by two crashing warships.

Admiral Yage's destroyers, as well as the ones they'd been battling, all surged forward to help, but the *Jagged Fel* and *Inviolable* were already too far ahead and falling too fast. There was no way to arrest them with tractor beams and no stopping the catastrophe to follow.

That knowledge was horrible enough, but in the Force, Kyra and Eli felt the collective terror of one trillion souls. On Coruscant and across the galaxy, citizens watched helplessly as the Federation News Bureau headquarters transmitted the final shots its cameras would ever take: two great fireballs tearing through the atmosphere on their way to catastrophic landfall.

Yet with that horrified urge to live, Kyra found up something else. There was a power in those collected minds, one she'd never felt before, though it reminded her of the whispered strength she'd heard on Zonama Sekot. It even, just a little, reminded her of that locked-away world where dreams had turned real.

*The rest is over to you*, Cade had said. In their foolishness, Kyra and Eli had thought he'd referred to them, personally. But Cade was with the Force now and the Force was bigger than that.

The Force was everything, and it was awakened as never before. And so, without even realizing what they were doing, the trillion minds of Coruscant joined as one. The desire was simple, shared by every Jedi and senator, every soldier, ever shop-keeper and banker, bartender and technician and bottom-feeder, every parent and every child. Every last sentient mind on Coruscant desired a single thing: they wanted to *live*.

And because the Force was the will to life, their desire was in perfect harmony with that wellspring of cosmic power. Together, a trillion luminous beings reached up with one invisible hand. They grasped the two tumbling warships and arrested their fall.

And then they pushed them back.

Few Coruscanti understood what was happening. Those watching the FNB broadcast stared at their holos in confusion and awe as the warships seemed to reverse the pull of gravity and surge away from the planet. The orbiting starships, as shocked as anyone, rushed in to hold the wreckage with their tractor beams and pull it safely clear. Those few who'd been trained to use the Force were overwhelmed. No Jedi, not even the most learned Master, had experienced the Force at work on this scale. Some who could understand the miracle collapsed in awe. Others wept or embraced.

Kyra and Eli, lying on the deck of their shuttle high above, understood better than anyone else. They were too weak to turn their heads, but they were one with each other and one with the Force and all it offered: timeless wonder, strength incalculable, glory beyond knowing.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

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Rain on Coruscant. The capital's weather control satellites had conjured a drift of heavy clouds that grayed the sky over Galactic City and dropped thin, steady curtains of water down the sides of its skyscrapers and into its bottomless canyons. Seen from a window of the palace complex's medical wing, the cityscape had taken on a silver sheen, with the furthest skyscrapers dissolved into gray-white.

When he'd been a denizen of Coruscant, Jao had never much enjoyed what the locals called 'cleaning days.' Yet when he looked on this mild deluge, summon to cleanse the atmosphere of smoke and ash left by the shield generator's explosion two days ago, he felt satisfied. The cool colorless scene put him at peace; so, too, did the Force.

It felt different now. Every Jedi he'd talked to had a different way of describing the change. For Jao, it seemed as though the trillion collected minds of Coruscant, which had formerly amounted to a bland white noise, now joined a common rhythm in the Force. Maybe it was nothing more than a shared mood, quite understandable after what the capital had been through over the past few days, but in the Force it still carried the unmistakable whisper of that moment where, without consciously willing it, Coruscant's trillion had unified to repel their own destruction.

He didn't and couldn't know what was to come of it. Sometimes this new Force scared him, but looking out on the rain-blurred city, he felt alright.

His comlink buzzed lightly in his pocket. Jao took it out, checked it, then stepped away from the window and went

deeper inside the medical center's recovery wing. An attendant took him to a private chamber where a bacta tank, now emptied, sat in one corner. In the other was a bed on which Kyra now sat, hair still wet and plastered to her face, a loose white shift around her body.

Her smile was weary, but Jao could feel its honesty.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm okay." She brushed hair off her left cheek. The years-old scar remained, but to Jao it looked fainter.

"Well, for somebody who spent forty seconds in hard vacuum you look amazing."

"Thanks. But... was it really that long?"

"The med droids said thirty-eight, if you want to be technical. They couldn't figure out how you're alive at all."

"I had help, I think." She looked down at hands folded in her lap. "I'm... pretty sure it came from Ania. Cade too."

Somehow, that didn't surprise him. "You mean you felt them in the Force?"

She nodded and smiled, almost shyly. Jao's heart swelled at the idea of Ania somehow still existing, even if it was on a plane beyond his understanding. More, he was happy to know that she was one with the Force. For as long as he'd known her he'd wished he'd been able to share some of its strength and wisdom with her. In the end, she'd unlocked it within herself.

"What about Eli?" Kyra asked.

"He's still in the bacta tank. The spacewalk was a little harder on him, by the med droid say he'll recover too."

"No, I mean, what *about* him? What happens to him now?"

"I don't know. He knew everything that Chalk did and was his partner for years."

"Eli killed Chalk too. He saved a lot of people."

"I know. I don't have an answer. I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Kyra sighed. "What else has been going on?"

"Things are moving fast. They're finishing post-battle cleanup in orbit. They've mopped up wreckage, even found some survivors on the *Jagged Fel*." He paused and added, "Not Chalk, though. And *Inviolable* was a lost cause. The fighting's stopped everywhere. Admiral Fenel's been taken into custody. He'll stand trial for some of what he did on Chalk's orders."

"Who's in charge?"

“Good question,” Jao sighed. “If he were alive, Stazi would probably have taken over everything... But right now, power’s effectively in the hands of the senate.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. For now they seemed pretty unified, but the Federation was set up to have an executive branch. Somebody’s going to have to be in charge, somehow...” He shook his head. “But that’s beyond me. I was never about politics.”

“Except when you and Ania blundered into them.” Kyra smiled faintly, but it wilted. Thought of the woman they’d lost would always be bittersweet. “What about the Imperial Knights? Were there any survivors?”

“Only a few,” he said sadly. It had been years since he’d considered himself a part of the organization, but its destruction had hit hard. “Master Dare and several others are still recovering from the bombing, but I’ve heard they’ll heal.”

“I’m surprised Chalk didn’t kill them in their hospital beds,” Kya muttered.

“He probably just hadn’t gotten around to it yet,” Jao said seriously. “But with no monarch and no regent, no real Empire anymore, their purpose is over. The Jedi say they’re going welcome them into their ranks...”

“If the Knights want to join,” Kyra finished. “Could be a hard sell.”

Jao nodded, but he hoped recent experiences had taught the surviving Imperial Knights some humility, and maybe even respect for their fellow Force-users.

There were a whole lot more of those now.

“What are the Jedi going to do?” Kyra asked. Her tone asked: *What will you do?*

“I’m not sure of anything yet,” Jao admitted, “But I think that if the Force really has changed the way we think, the Jedi are going to be needed now more than ever, as teachers.”

“They’re gonna have a lot of students.”

“Maybe.” For a second Jao allowed himself to drop a little deeper into the Force and feel all the thousands of lives active in this building, and in the endless city beyond. Still, there was a rhythm. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do?”

“First,” she said, “I want to go to Esseles and see if they’ve put A-gee back together.”

Jao cursed himself for forgetting about the droid. "That's a good idea. I should go too. But what happens after that?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "But I'm pretty sure of one thing."

"What's that?"

"For now, the galaxy can look after itself."

She exhaled and fell back, flopping onto the bed like a child. Jao didn't begrudge her a thing. If the weight of the Force was spread wider than ever before, it meant she no longer had to shoulder so much of its burden.

And neither did he.

Saarai was amazed at how easily she was pulled back into the machinery of politics. She mostly had Monia to thank for that. Being declared pariah by Hogrum Chalk meant the Mon Cal senator was in demand now as the legislature scrambled to put together a new constitution. It was generally agreed that some executive power had to be restored, though with no clear line of succession the senate was in danger of falling back into the partisans squabbles that Chalk had so easily manipulated.

She saw a way to prevent that, though she hesitated to use it. When she'd forcefully bridged the senators' minds during the standoff two days ago, Saarai had felt a thrill at the power she'd exerted. It had carried with it all the temptation of the Sith, and she'd felt that if she just pressed a little more she could dominate them the way her father had shown her.

The temptation was still strong. Without it, she feared the senators might splinter off again. The military seemed cohesive right now, but if that broke apart they might be heading for yet another civil war.

During the most frustrated moments at these meetings, Saarai understood her father and Krayt terribly well. She knew why they'd tried to impose their will on the galaxy with brute force, and why they'd thought the only way to bring order to chaos was to stamp every last vermin underfoot.

But there were no more vermin, not in the way the One Sith had meant. The Force was alive like it had never been, and that offered hope and danger in equal measure.

Because she needed some kind of stability, Saarai sought it in the only place she'd gotten it before. During a break between



meetings, she went to the Jedi Temple to seek out K'Kruhk.

Chalk had kept the great structure hollow for the past three years. The Jedi were still cleaning the place and investigating it for any unwelcome traps the late regent may have felt behind. After so many purges and scatterings their Order had been reduced, and even with the few surviving Imperial Knights joining in the reconstruction, the Temple felt hollow. Every step she took seemed to echo through the oversized corridors, and even in the Force those knights at work felt small.

In the dark meditation chamber, though, it was different. When she calmed her mind she could feel isolated from all the trillion souls of Coruscant. That could have been frightening, because Saaraï did not yet trust herself, but K'Kruhk was here with her. When the ancient Jedi master guided her mind to calm she could feel the weight of all his wearying years. She knew the tribulations he'd experienced, the joys, the doubt that had crippled him for decades. And she knew that, while so many Force-users were awed by the changes taking place, the old Whiphid was facing them calmly, readied for successes and disappointments both.

Saaraï prayed she could be among the former.

"It's still very hard sometimes," she told him. They sat on opposing cushions, facing each other in pitch-blackness. "We can't afford to let this moment of unity slip away, but the senators- Imperial and Alliance both- can be so stubborn. The temptation to *make* them agree is so strong."

"You would steal their will from them to enact your own. That's surely of the dark side."

"I know. But I'd do it for their own benefit..."

"And it's for you to decide the best interests of others?"

She'd been expecting that one and smiled wryly in the dark. "Porat used to say that if you don't like deciding what's best for other people, you're not going to go into politics."

"Perhaps. But you must respect their desires if you wish them to respect yours." After a pause, K'Kruhk asked, "Is politics where you belong, Saaraï?"

"That's what I'm trying to decide. As frustrating as these talks can be... they're also necessary. Monia- Senator Gahan- says that Porat's replacement representing Champala has

resigned. He was installed there by Chalk, not elected, so he no longer had legitimacy. They'll be holding an election to replace him."

"Are you being pressured to run?"

"Monia is. Nicely."

"I can sense you're tempted."

"There are lots of kinds of temptations nowadays."

"True. But not all of them need to be resisted."

Saarai exhaled. She unfolded the hands in her lap. "I don't fully trust myself yet. You know that, Master. I still want to dominate and right every wrong. I want to make it a place where men like Porat don't suffocate in slaughtered ships. Is that really so dark?"

She heard K'Kruhk's heavy breath. "When I was young, I knew a Jedi who was not like any other. He'd been trained in use of the Force early on, by a father who was powerful in it. His parent died when he was young, and he struggled to accept that. More, he struggled against the anger inside him. He hated all the galaxy's irrational pain and sometimes he hated the Force too, and in time he viewed it not as a blessing but a bane to be dominated and remade into a tool. And at the core he was still a child, raging at the simple unfairness of life."

The words chilled her. "What happened to that Jedi?"

"He became Darth Krayt."

Saarai stared into the darkness. Her eyes found nothing, but in the Force K'Kruhk was still there, ancient and wearied but bright.

"From his desire to bring justice came the need to dominate. From there, Krayt willingly embraced the dark, because it was the only way to accomplish his ends."

She shook her head fiercely. "Where are you going with all this? What do you want me to *do*?"

She ached for a clear answer. K'Kruhk made a deep, thoughtful hum and said, "I believe there is much you can do for the Federation, Saarai. You're stronger than you know. But if you are ever in fear of falling, we will be here to catch you."

"You mean the Jedi?"

"Yes."

The offer warmed her; he'd already given her strength and direction from sources she'd never imagined. She'd always

known, intellectually, that the Force was larger than what the Sith had taught her. She'd never imagined until now the depths it possessed.

"We can offer you guidance," said K'Kruhk. "And though we have no desire to become a part of the government again, we are always willing to facilitate peace."

They'd done it once already, melding minds to share the truth of Marasiah's last days. The effect had been stunning, but Saara knew not all bridges could be made so easily. "Many senators, on all sides, are skeptical about the Force."

"They are part of it, now more than ever."

Saara still didn't know if they were right to be. "Do you really believe the Force touches *everyone* now?"

"It always did."

"But do you think everyone could use it, every sentient in the galaxy?"

"It's already revealing itself in unexpected ways. You felt that yourself, when all Coruscant rose in its own defense."

"That's what worries me. I know how the dark seduces."

"Not as much as it once did, perhaps."

She remembered their conversation on *Paramount*, where K'Kruhk had suggested they were now tapping into the purest form of the Force, untainted by the schism that had divided the Whills. It was a fond dream to think of that the dark side no longer seduced, but Saara had seen much evil in her life, and she'd seen it more closely than even K'Kruhk had. Try as she might, she could not imagine a galaxy without some darkness. It would always be there in every heart, hate as natural as love, and in the wrong situations just as fierce.

"I hope that's true," she allowed. "But if Skywalker was right, and the Whills colored the Force light and dark, doesn't that mean *we* can color the Force? I've heard about how the ancient Je'daii splintered. The Yuuzhan Vong and Rakata were deep into the Force but they fell entirely to the dark. Couldn't that happen to us now?"

"We must be vigilant," K'Kruhk agreed. "That is why the Jedi Order will offer guidance in the days to come. Though our numbers are few, I hope to open places across the galaxy where beings can come with questions about their new powers."

Without the Sith, the Jedi might be able to successfully steer this new galaxy toward peace. But even then, they'd never have total success. "You can't keep everyone in the light," she warned.

"We never could. The balance between light and dark is never decided on a Jedi council, or even on a battlefield. It is only ever made here."

Though she couldn't see it, Saara knew he tapped the center of his chest. She put a hand above her own heart and felt it ache for Porat and all the others who had died. Even her father.

"Do not grieve," said K'Kruhk. "You were raised in darkness, expelled from it, and then turned to light. You are the future, Saara."

Her whole body tightened. She choked out, "You think so? Truly?"

"It is my hope," he said, and she felt his gentle smile. "In the end, that's where all light lies."

No one had decided what to call the brief, scattered conflict that had changed the shape of the galaxy. It hadn't truly been a war, despite its bloody battles. There'd been no campaigns or declarations, and most of the galaxy's citizens had barely been aware it was happening until it was nearly over. Even days later, the news coming from Coruscant was so shocking many strained to accept it.

Despite all this, the dead deserved remembrance and the new Federation government was determined to give them their due. The memorial ceremony took place at night, when the luminous geography of moving airspeeders once more crisscrossed the skylaners. One of the largest public stadiums in Galactic City had been repurposed for the event, its sporting-arena stands dressed up as finely as possible to give the event the serious airs it deserved.

To Shado Vao, who watched from the bottom-level seats reserved for government officials and honored guests, the whole thing reminded him of the funeral for Roan Fel. That had been just as formal but a smaller affair, thrown together by the Jedi and Imperial Knights in the immediate aftermath of Darth Krayt's defeat. He could still remember the flames of Fel's pyre reaching toward the sky, their glow flickering on the

face of Hogrum Chalk as he spoke an earnest-seeming funeral oration, and on Marasiah as she grimly watched her father burn. Seeds had been planted even then for this moment, though at the time Shado hadn't noticed any of them. The future, like the Force, outwit all certainties.

This was a greater ceremony than Roan Fel ever got. Though it was nominally in honor of all those killed during the recent conflict, which the current total put at a relatively low six hundred thousand, it was seen by all as a memorial for Gar Stazi and Marasiah Fel. Those there was no pyre to burn this time, six hundred thousand small lights were lit in the center of the stadium field, and a large holo-image of Stazi in his finest galactic Alliance uniform was projected high for all to see.

The final form of the new government hadn't been decided, but talk had it that Senator Gahan might end up as a new executive. As such, she was the one to stand beneath the holo and speak of her former commander. "The debt we owe to Gar Stazi is incalculable," she said, "Unlike the admiral, I don't dare to do the impossible, so I won't try to summarize it in words. However, I will speak from the heart about what he meant to me. During the darkest hours of the war against Krayt, the admiral was a symbol for we Alliance soldiers to rally around, His daring inspired us all to keep fighting, even when we felt bowed and oppressed by the totality of Sith domination.

"But it is, I think, to the admiral's ultimate credit that he was more than just that. He thought of himself as a soldier first and foremost, in that in that he was correct, but he was also a leader to the core. We shifted from war to politics together, and I got to know my commander in new ways. I discovered him as a person, and I learned how uncomfortable he was with the new struggles of a fragile peace.

"But even then, Stazi continued to fight. Despite all their differences, he and Empress Fel stood together to preserve the core values of the new Federation against extremists from all sides. They respected each other immensely and never betrayed one another. In war and peace, they both sought to build a strong, prosperous, unified galaxy.

"And when the time came for war again, Admiral Stazi did not shirk. When freed from unjust imprisonment, he was

immediately thrown into the fray. Within hours he was commanding troops in battle again. He embraced these new challenges and in the end made the ultimate sacrifice to protect Coruscant from destruction.

"He was my inspiration ten years ago. He inspires me now even more. I will do my best to honor his sacrifice by ensuring a peaceful, unified, prosperous Federation. I hope that all of us will be inspired by Gar Stazi to do the same."

Though it seemed somewhat rude to clap at a funeral, Gahan retreated to her seat to thunderous applause.

Those assembled on the stage were a curious brew. Senators, Imperial and Alliance, sat in a mixed group. Military officers clustered in another set of seats; Shado marked Rulf Yage, newly-promoted Admiral Bovark, and Admiral Slossar. Absolved resistance leaders were among them too: Sukharr, Ekorian, Anj Dahl, Saarai Derrol. Master K'Kruhk and many other Jedi sat together on the near side of the stage.

Shado was not with them. Sitting beside him on the low bench on the stadium floor, Astraal leaned in and whispered, "Are you sure you don't belong there?"

"I don't think I do," he said as Rulf Yage stood up for another oration.

"Then where *do* you belong?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

All his life he'd had the desire to do great things and right great wrongs. With the Force on his side that had been a strength, but without it he'd done great harm while convincing himself he was doing right. The Force was with him again, but he felt like he'd been purged of his old need. Rescuing his sister from Chalk's prison, saving one life he cared about, had filled him with grace like his great Jedi deeds never had.

Astraal looked like she was about to say something more, but Yage took to the podium and began to speak. Above him, another large holo appeared. He felt Astraal's pang of grief as she looked up at the oversized image of Marasiah Fel.

"Our beloved empress was born to rule," Yage said. "It was a duty inherited from three Fel emperors before her, and she felt its weight from a young age. The young princess I knew was always serious beyond her years, as though she were preparing herself for the burdens and tragedies ahead."

“The weight of expectation we lay on our daughters is not always good for them. What Marasiah may have been without them I cannot say. I know she chafed beneath the responsibilities placed on her, though she buried objections so deep I don’t think even she recognized them. In the end our empress realized her destiny lay on a different path than what she’d expected. The Jedi say she has joined with the Force, not dying but ascending. They say she hasn’t left us but is with us even now.

“Frankly, gentles, that is beyond me. But I do know this. Even when Marasiah ceased to be empress she always sought to do what was right. This new galaxy we live in now is in many ways her creation. She and Admiral Stazi have bequeathed it to us, and in that sense I do believe they are still with us. But in a more literal sense they are gone, and it is up to us to determine our fates.

“As Senator Gahan said, we must honor them by continuing as they’d wished. As newly-appointed Supreme Commander of all Federation armed forces, I swear to uphold their shared values. I will protect a peaceful, unified, and prosperous Federation to the best of my ability. And I know, as I stand here before you, that we can all work together to see this done.”

Yage lacked Gahan’s gift for speaking, but the dour admiral received his own share of applause as he left the podium. As those around them clapped, Shado leaned toward his sister and asked, “Where do *you* belong now?”

Astraal looked at him and blinked. “They say the Jedi are going to open up academies. That they’ll welcome anyone who wants to learn more about the Force.”

“That’s right.”

“Well,” she smiled a little, “I sort of lost my old job. I think I might go back to school.”

Her felt her earnestness and it surprised him. As children she’d been as strong in the Force as him, but she’d elected to join the Imperial Mission instead of the Jedi. He’d been disappointed but gradually had come to accept it.

Now it seemed that, too, was being reversed. Shado smiled lightly, reached out, and put a hand on her arm. “That’s good, Astraal. I’m glad for you. It’s something worth discovering.”

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

He was too, though he didn't say it. His sister surely knew.

As another speaker came to the podium- Senator Eldon this time- Astraal leaned closer and whispered, "I've thought about going to the schools the Jedi are trying to set up... But I think I'd prefer a personal touch."

Shado took her meaning and paled. "No, that's not right..."

"You *are* a Jedi Master. Or at least you were."

"I wasn't much of one."

"You were much better than you think, brother."

Maybe, maybe not. He'd decided it wasn't for him to say.

"I'm just not sure if I can teach you what you need to know."

"Then maybe I can teach you something. Maybe we can learn together."

He found it hard to argue; he wasn't even sure he wanted to. She bled sincerity in the Force and more, confidence. Astraal really, truly believed that he was the best teacher she could have. The conviction was infectious.

"I can't promise anything," he said, "But I'm willing to give it a shot."

"That's all I ask." Astraal squeezed his hand, released it, and looked back to the ceremony.

Shado admired her profile, the slight smile on her lips. Then he turned and watched it too.

The ceremony was supposed to be a solemn occasion to stop and reflect, but for those with responsibilities, even this was no escape from a changing galaxy.

Gunner didn't mind the changes, at least not yet, but she was starting to chafe under the responsibilities. As soon as the ceremony ended and the very important persons filtered off the arena floor and into its backstage area, she found herself arraigned, with a friendly smile, by Anj Dahl. Though a rebel guerilla just last week, she'd been appointed co-chair of a committee designated by Starfighter Command to oversee the integration of former Imperial and Alliance units. Gunner was, naturally, the other co-chair.

"From a tactical standpoint there's advantages to using TIEs and Crossfires for joint operations," Gunner admitted, "But we have to look at practical implications. Our star destroyers can



carry your fighters, though they weren't built for. Your rebel-*your Alliance-* ships don't have the infrastructure to host TIE squadrons."

"We can install that," Anj insisted. "As long as we can allocate funds and resources."

Her look was brief but imploring. Gunner had never expected to enjoy being the daughter of the Federation's new supreme commander, but she was just starting to understand how annoying it would be.

"We can go through the proper channels and make requests," she relented.

"Excellent." Anj flashed another bright grin. "In the meantime, I don't think it will be a problem to increase cooperative training sessions. TIE pilots can learn how handy it is to work with Crossfires, and vice-versa.

"I don't have a problem with that."

"Good. Then we can start drawing up a proposal for the higher-ups."

"We can." Gunner tugged the tight collar of her dress uniform. "But not *now*."

"Fair enough. I just wanted to make sure you were okay with the basics." Anj sketched a coy salute. "We can talk more later."

The rebel pilot slinked away through the slowly-dispersing crowd. Once she was gone Gunner sighed, then began seeking out her father. She didn't have to look with her eyes. Despite the many people still gathered backstage she knew instantly where to find him. Lately he seemed to exist for her within a sixth sense. Maybe the Force was spreading wide to touch everyone, as the Jedi were saying. She didn't like that idea; it seemed the ingredient for chaos, and they'd had more than enough of that lately. But at times, in small doses, the new sense could be useful.

She approached her father from behind as he finished a conversation with Senator Rey'lya. Rulf turned as though he'd expected her; apparently his sixth sense was working too.

Despite that, they stared at each other for a moment before Gunner found words. "That was a good speech, father. You should be proud."

"Thank you. It didn't have the same rhetoric as those

senators' speeches, but I think it was... sufficient."

"You're going to have to be more boastful now. You *are* head of the whole armed forces. You've got authority to exert." She smirked. "And to think mother left you for Veed because you didn't have enough ambition."

Mention of Morrigan Corde put another silence between them. Rulf said, "Your mother was wrong about many things... But she was right about some, too."

"Was she?"

"A few. She thought *you* had promise, even if she didn't think much of me."

Gunner snorted. "She had a strange way of showing her affections."

"She wasn't a woman who trusted affection. Or anything, or anyone. If she had been able to..." Rulf shook his head. "But that's all in the past."

"I know."

Silence again. That sixth sense made the awkwardness even thicker. He asked, "Did you learn what happened to your brother?"

She'd talked to Jariah Syn and Deliah Blue after the battle. The story they'd told still didn't make sense to her and she doubted it ever would. Jariah said there was a recording of Cade's last moments, but it was currently stored on an astromech droid lightyears away. Gunner felt no need to see it. Even if she did, it wouldn't help her understand what he'd done.

But Gunner was a practical person, and she didn't need to grasp every how and why. She knew *what* Cade had done, that it had been brave and changed the galaxy beyond measure. For Cade there seemed no other possible end, and she'd told his friends that. She'd picked up something weird from them then, not on their faces but through the sixth sense she was still reluctant to call the Force.

Smiling sadly, Deliah had told her Cade hadn't ended. She said he *couldn't* end, now that he'd become the very foundation of the power that now enriched the galaxy.

Gunner had no idea what that meant, but she could tell it gave Deliah and Jariah strength and decided to take some from it too.

Her father looked at her, expectant. She simply said, "I learned enough."

That was all she had to say. Rulf nodded. "I'm glad."

"So am I." She released a sigh. "One thing about your speech, father, before I forget. It was a little too obvious sometimes."

"Obvious?"

"The part about the unreasonable expectations we place on our daughters." Gunner put hands on her hips. "That was supposed to be some kind of personal apology, right?"

His left eyebrow twitched. "Possibly."

"Well save it. I really, truly, don't need them. So I had one overbearing parent, and one who was basically absent while secretly living a double-life and triple-crossing the Sith. Or maybe quadruple-crossing. Compared to Cade's upbringing, mine was still normal. So don't apologize."

He actually looked chastened by her firmness. "I understand."

"Good." Gunner relaxed to a smile. "That said, all these new responsibilities you're throwing at me are going to take some getting used to."

Rulf couldn't let that one go. "Compared to *my* responsibilities, you're getting off light."

"I know. And that's why I won't complain. By the way, my co-chair from the integration committee had some suggestions she wanted me to run by you."

"You should take them through the proper channels."

"I know, but I wanted your opinion." She smirked. "What's the point of having a big-shot father is he's not useful now and then?"

Coruscant's weather control had cleared rainy skies for the memorial service, and the following day was bright. Humidity lingered all day, and when the afternoon sun slanted westward it burned that still-thick air with golden light. Watching from a ledge halfway up the Jedi Temple, Azlyn Rae felt damp breeze on her face, almost playful as it touched her scars. She looked away from the sun itself, which still crested the western skyscrapers, and toward on the government palace that loomed a kilometer south.

The government had had a busy day. A committee of senior senators had just finished the first draft of a new constitution. Much was unchanged from the version written six years ago, after Krayt's death. The major revisions affected the executive branch, which successively lost its triumvirate, its duumvirate, and its regent. According to reports, the new President of the Galactic Federation would be elected from a council of senior officials, who'd themselves be selected from the larger senate. Those council officials would be chosen based on geography, apparently a move made to circumvent Imperial-Alliance rivalries while ensuring participation of all galactic regions, not just the inner sectors that usually dominated.

Azlyn had no idea if that would work. Politics had never been her specialty, government even less so, but it seemed that adjustments to the plan could be made as needed. Based on the rumors she'd heard, Monia Gahan was an early front-runner for the president's position, which sounded to her like things were moving in the right direction.

Time would tell. Azlyn looked forward to finding out, one way or another.

"Does it feel like a homecoming?" said a voice behind her.

Azlyn had been expecting him. She turned to see Ganner walk onto the platform. Wind bristled his short red hair and beard; she still wasn't used to those. Nor was she used to seeing him dressed as he was now: a plain white tunic, like a Jedi's.

"No," she admitted. "It really doesn't. When I was a Jedi- when I was an apprentice- I spent most of my time at the academy on Ossus. I was hardly ever here."

He stepped up behind her, closer to the edge. "You were with Cade and Shado there."

"That's right." She hugged herself, arms crossed beneath her respirator. "Cade would come here sometimes with his father, but he'd always act relieved when he came back to Ossus. He'd say there were too many people here, too many stuffed-shirts, too many rules..." She smirked at the memory. Even back then, for better or worse, Cade had been Cade.

"They say he's a rule himself now," Ganner muttered. "A law within the Force. Ironical. In a way."

"Cade's more than a rule. He's a bridge, a river... a possibility."

“An open door.”

She looked at Ganner. He stared out at the glittering cityscape with an expression of melancholy.

“That’s a poetic way to put it,” Azlyn said.

“I know. But... I think he’d like it.”

He was right. Cade probably would. And she suspected that Marasiah, who now fulfilled the same role as Cade and Ania and Marin, would appreciate it too, in her own way.

Azlyn sighed. With an afternoon shining like this, she could only imagine how picturesque sundown and twilight would be. She was tempted to stay here

“You know,” she said, “I could ask you the same thing. About homecoming.”

“This temple was never my home.”

“No. But Coruscant was. Or was it?”

“For a few years, maybe. But not in my heart.” Ganner’s brow furrowed in melancholy thought. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a home, not really. I had... an ideal. A purpose. That felt like a home, while it lasted.”

She put a tender hand on his shoulder. “The empress is gone, and so are her Knights, but the Force is still here.”

“And the Jedi. I respect them, but they’re your people, not mine.”

“These aren’t the Jedi I knew. They can’t be. The Force is different now and so are they. K’Kruhk says he wants to turn the Jedi into teachers. He’s already setting up places on a hundred other planets where they can meet and guide people who want to understand what the Force means for them.”

“That’s going to stretch the Order thin.”

“I know. And that’s why they need help.” She squeezed his arm, just a little.

Ganner looked down at her. “So that’s what you’re going to be then? A teacher?”

“I think so. I talked to Master Tuum about it while he was recovering from his wounds. He says the Jedi- *and* the Imperial Knights- need everyone who’s willing to help steer the galaxy toward the light. That includes me. And, maybe, you.”

He looked away again. “The Force didn’t come back to me as easily as it did to you. I still can’t find clarity, not like I could before. Just... one time, really.”

“When was that?”

“When I was down in that black shaft, using the Force to cut the trigger-wire for those explosive charges. One after another after another, in exact order, or I’d blow myself and you and all the senators apart.” He smirked, just a little. “At least I have grace under pressure.”

“It means you can draw on the Force when you need it most. That’s good. It gives you a place to start.”

“Don’t tell me Chalk left more hidden bombs lying around.”

That wasn’t something to joke about. “Not that we can tell,” Azlyn said seriously. “But if you need focus- a purpose, and a job- I think the Jedi can offer that.”

He stared at the skyline and thought. She could tell the offer tempted. Ganner knew himself and knew he was nothing without a higher cause to serve. His doubt was in his own abilities. He was too much haunted by failure; it left him lonely and afraid.

Azlyn shifted his hand down to take his. “They’re not going to fling you off to some outpost if you don’t want to go,” she told him. “And if you need to be with someone for a while- someone who can help you and guide you when you need it- I’m sure they’d be okay with that.”

Ganner looked at her, then at her hand. Slowly, firmly, he squeezed it.

That was answer enough. They looked away from each other and watched the skyline again. In the slanting light, it seemed like a forest of gold jewels.

After a while, Ganner said, “With a sky like this, sundown should be beautiful.”

“Then we should stay here and watch.” Azlyn smiled. “Right now, I’ve got no place else to be.”

## Chapter Fifty

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After a day of sunlight came another one of rain, and after that, overcast skies. The designs of Coruscant's weather controllers seemed incalculable, but as he stood on the landing platform that hovered south of the government district, Eli Horn felt glad for it. The dim light, filtered through the featureless gray clouds, imparted in him a needed tranquility. Even the far-off, ever-moving lines of airspeeders were faint to the eye, and it felt as though the bustling cityscape was nonetheless at peace.

After staring at the gray for some time, he turned and faced commotion. The Sekotan flyer landed behind him stretched long green wings nearly to the platform's edges. The landing ramp was down, and its crew was moving wide supply-crates into the main hold. Still Yuuzhan Vong despite the durasteel forest in which they stood, they eschewed loading droids and hauled the cargo up with straining arms and stiff backs. Their stubbornness brought a faint smile to Eli's face; he was glad some things hadn't changed.

Some, he knew, belonged to the group that had followed Khat Lah to Rohakalla. Others were shapers and intendents who'd come with Nei Rin to plead their case before the still-in-progress Federation government. All felt alive in the Force.

The flyer had arrived three days before. The day after that, a Federation military review board had granted Eli amnesty for his actions in service of the usurper Chalk. Khat Lah had been evasive when Eli asked if he'd had a hand in that; he'd pointed out, rightly, that most of the soldiers who'd fought on Chalk's side during the recent battles were also being absolved. But

there was more to Eli's case, and they both knew it.

But strange things were afoot all around. The Federation was groping toward a new government. The military was going to take aggressive action to integrate Alliance and Imperial personnel into single units, which seemed to Eli an even more important route to prevent fresh fighting. The Jedi were talking of opening up schools galaxy-wide to offer wisdom to those newly blessed with the Force. He knew demand would swamp their supply.

He couldn't help but wonder if things were still headed toward disaster. The Force was more awake than ever, which meant it could touch and control the lives of countless more sentients. It seemed that, in this universal state, the Yuuzhan Vong and Rakata had fallen to the dark and created monstrous civilizations. The ancient Je'daii on Tython, with their own Force-filled society, had fallen to internecine slaughter.

The Force moved in waves: great, slow, and powerful. As yet, he had no idea where this one was surging. Very likely he'd live the rest of his life and die without understanding. History, despite its recent dramatic turns, was a grinding thing, and not even ancient K'Kruhk could see its totality.

Some signs dared Eli to hope. The Yuuzhan Vong delegation had arrived to show hard data about the progress it was making undoing the Sith damage to the Ossus Project. Nei Rin's presentation, as Eli understood it, had been met with skepticism, though less than expected. The Federation had agreed to set up its own commission for further study, and Nei Rin and a team of shapers had agreed to stay on Coruscant, in the protection of the Jedi Temple, to work directly with the Federation.

News of that meeting had been made public, and while there had been some protests the weary galactic citizens seemed willing to wait and see what came of it. Perhaps, they hoped, the corruption of the Ossus Project could be undone after all. A hundred worlds might yet become paradise; Kol Skywalker's dream might be accomplished. In this new galaxy, people were willing to wait and see. Eli wondered if that was the Force itself in action.

Most of the Yuuzhan Vong, however, would be leaving Coruscant, and he sensed they were glad to get away from this



artificial world. Yesterday, as he'd ended his recuperation after his drift through the vacuum, Khat Lah come to him, offering him the chance to journey to those recovering worlds and assist in their healing.

"I don't know anything about shaping or bioforming," he'd protested, thinking about how his father had.

"Neither did Marasiah Fel," said Khat Lah. "But she learned. And she did important work."

Not as important as she'd done later. Eli had wondered, "Is that what you want me to become then? Another Marasiah?"

Like him, her life and mission had collapsed on her. Like him, she'd fled from the wreckage and found herself among nothing. Unlike him, she's recovered strength and purpose in the end. Eli had no idea where to start looking. Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn't have been better to die in cold space. Certainly it would have been easier.

But Khat Lah had told him, "No. Not Marasiah."

He'd added no names, but Eli had knew who he'd had in mind.

He thought about that now as he watched the Yuuzhan Vong load up the final crates. He didn't know what he'd find when he went with them, but they were offering him company, work, and perhaps even purpose. He couldn't turn them down when he had none of those things.

He watched as Xahn Carr waved a few straggling shapers into the flyer, then barked up a few commands in Yuuzhan Vong. Eli might have to learn some of that tongue; another challenge. The scarred warrior looked at him across the landing pad, made a small 'come aboard' gesture, then walked up the ramp.

Eli waited until he was gone, then took one last circular look around this calm gray Coruscant. Before he could step toward the flyer he spotted a single airspeeder drawing near, its headlight bright punctuation in the morning calm. Eli stayed where he was, feet planted on the deck. He knew who it was through the Force alone.

He waited in place while Kyra locked her speeder against the pad's docking clamp. She vaulted out of the carriage, then walked steadily toward him. No one else was with her. He was surprised she'd come at all. They'd not spoken since their tumble through the vacuum, or more accurately since she'd

pulled him out of that doomed shuttle. During his time in the bacta tank and the recuperation that had followed he'd sensed her in the Force but hadn't tried reaching out for her. He'd had no idea what to say.

He still didn't. She stopped two meters directly ahead of him. Cool wind pulled her ponytail sideways and flicked hair across her face. She had a small pack slung over one shoulder and, he thought, no weapons in sight.

They hadn't met like this since Rohakalla. He examined her face; like her emotions it was too guarded to read, though he noted that the lightsaber-scar he'd left on her cheek had gone faint. He had to strain his eyes to see.

"What will you do now?" he asked. If she was here, she already knew his plans.

"I've got some friends to pick up. A-gee Thirty-Seven, that droid you cut up on Ania's ship, has been put back together."

"Ah."

"After that," she admitted, "I'm not sure."

"The Jedi want teachers."

"I'm not cut out for that. There's so much I need to learn. To understand..." She looked away. "I think I need to travel for a while. I've gotten to see a lot of the galaxy, more than I ever thought I would, but most of it I didn't see the way I'd like to."

"Ah," he said again. Silence and slow wind passed between them. "Thank you for saving my life."

"I didn't save you. Ania and Cade- the Force- *they* saved us."

"No," he said calmly. "You did."

She admitted his point with one small nod.

He felt how tired she was of bearing the galaxy's weight. Destiny was an awful thing. Skywalkers might be able to bear it, even embrace it, but Kyra and Eli were not Skywalkers. They were just people, left alone in a strange new galaxy.

Yet despite being alone he didn't feel lonely. Not there, as he stood facing Kyra. During their fall through the void, the Force that had protected them had also bound them, to the point where the line separating them seemed dissolved. Eli would never forget what that felt like and neither would she, but despite that accord everything else stood between them. It was time to go separate ways.

He knew that and so did she. Kyra reached into her bag and

pulled something out. Eli caught the glint of metal right as she said "Catch."

He caught the lightsaber against his chest. Even before looking at it he knew it would be Talon's. That weapon, and that woman, had been many things to him over the years. He wasn't sure what she meant now. Maybe Khat Lah would give him an answer one day, if the Yuuzhan Vong ever tired of being cryptic. Maybe he'd find one himself.

"They found that when digging through the wreckage of your bomb," Kyra told him. "I think it still works."

"That wasn't my bomb," he said. "It was Chalk's."

"He planted it for one reason. You set it off for something different. It was your bomb."

He looked at her, wondering if she'd also intervened on his behalf. The Force wasn't telling and neither was she. He'd have to get used to not knowing.

As he held it up Eli examined the cylinder and saw only small scratches on the surface. Kyra reminded him, "It was Jao's originally. Then she stole it and fixed it up with her Sith crystal."

"I know. He doesn't want it back?"

She shook her head. "He wants to build a new one."

A new weapon for a new man. It seemed wrong for him to take Talon's. Then he remembered the weapon he'd made himself and left with Kyra. She'd replaced that red crystal with a white one, making the blade her own. She sensed his thought, and with one smooth motion drew that lightsaber from her bag. She held it tight in her hand.

"What are offering me?" he asked.

"Whatever you want."

He stared at the two weapons: Jao's and Talon's, his and Kyra's. The one in her hand had been built by a Jedi apprentice, changed by a young man stricken by grief and turned into a tool of the Sith. Since then, it had been remade again into a colorless weapon that dealt hard justice.

He didn't want anything to do with it. Talon's weapon- he could only think of it as such- had been remade twice as well. Its final incarnation had acted in concert with the Force in ways the others hadn't, even though its owner couldn't hear the melody herself. But she'd striven for it, and as Skywalker had

said, it was the striving that made the difference.

Eli knew what he had to do. Calmly, he opened himself to the Force and felt the intricacies of both lightsabers. Kyra sensed his actions, his purpose, and decided to join him.

Each let the lightsaber rise from palm to the air and hover between them. Using the Force alone, Eli took apart Talon's just as Kyra took apart his. Tiny pieces held still in the wind as Eli gingerly removed the white crystal from his saber- Kyra's saber- and moved it into Talon's. At the same time he moved the red Sith crystal into his hand. Then he sealed the pieces of Talon's saber tight, just as Kyra combined the parts of hers. And then, finally, each lightsaber settled back into the palm from which it had come.

When he opened his eyes Eli stared at Talon's weapon. It looked so familiar, but when he pressed the trigger a pure white blade extended. Satisfied, he turned it off.

Kyra understood that was what he needed. Yet she surprised him by spinning on one heel, cocking back her arm, and hurling the second lightsaber off the platform edge. He watched it pinwheel against the gray cityscape until it fell from view, into a miles-deep chasm.

She looked at him, tired smile on her face, and said, "If I need another one, I'll build it. But that thing, I'm sick of."

Eli simply nodded. Kyra's eyes went over his shoulder and he turned. Khat Lah, gray hair spread down to his shoulders, stood beneath the flyer's nose, watching in silence.

"Shouldn't keep your ride waiting," Kyra told him.

Eli tried to think of something final to speak, but no words seemed appropriate. Kyra said, "I would wish the Force to be with you... But I'm not sure you'd like that."

He wasn't sure either, but the Force was with him regardless. That was fact, as simple as it was incomprehensible. He sighed and said, "I think I need whatever I can get."

Kyra smiled softly, turned, and walked away.

Eli walked too. He followed Khat Lah into the flyer, through its hold, all the way to its cockpit, where the pilots sat masked by their cognition hoods. The organic ship was already rising, propelled by dovin basals so smooth and silent he hadn't even felt them kick off. He strained toward the viewing lens for one last look at Kyra, but they were already well above the pad.

As low-level cloud-whisps brushed their ship he asked Khat Lah, "What happens now? Where do we go?"

"You already know. There are a hundred worlds that need healing. We have our work cut out for us."

"I know that. But which one comes first?"

The Yuuzhan Vong looked at him seriously, and Eli knew the answer before it left his lips. "Duro."

He'd never been there physically since that day; mentally he'd stayed there for many years. It wouldn't be easy returning to the place of his father's death. But he hadn't expected the rest of his life to be easy.

"All right," he said. "Duro it is."

The flyer shook as it stabbed through the cloud layer. Then it was above it, soaring against a soft grey sprawl and gleaming in clear blue sky. Eli held the back of the pilot's chair, watching as they soared past sky into night-black space, toward stars twinkling wonders he had never known.

Esseles was a blue-green marble of salty seas, though as they dove toward the planet Jariah could make out the faint swirls of white clouds and dark dots of island chains. When they started to buffer through the atmospheric envelope he muttered, "Didn't we just leave this party?"

No one responded. Jao Assam, sitting at the controls of the shuttle he'd been given by his new Jedi pals, hadn't visited the Thrumble Foundation in four years. The same was true for Kyra, who stood behind his chair, watching the planet intently as they surged to meet it. As for Deliah, she said nothing, though Jariah could feel the bittersweet pang when she thought of Cade. If they'd known a stop at a droid repair shop would be the last flight they'd take together...

Enough of that. Jariah had always thought of himself as a guy who lived in the present and acted for the future. Despite everything he'd been through, he hoped that still held.

As the shuttle swooped toward churning seas, he asked Jao, "How long you plan on staying? I know you got your teaching gig or whatever to be at."

"It's not teaching," he said testily. "The Jedi are using the term 'counselor,' which is about as good as anything. There's a lot of people in old Imperial space who are going to have a

hard time understanding what's happening to them. We need to help them as best we can."

Jariah noted how easily *the Jedi* became *we*. But Jao was right; Jariah had been lucky in that he'd had his best friend beside him to keep him from going dark or crazy after getting the Force. He'd decided to pay it forward by staying with Deliah for a while, even if they hadn't decided where they'd end up.

"Well," he said, "Thanks for taking us this far. Ain't sure where we'll go next... but we'll figure something out."

"I was going to hitch a ride with Sauk back to Bavinyar," Kyra said. "I doubt A-gee would mind if you come along."

"And where do you go from there?" asked Deliah.

The girl had been quiet with her plans so far. She looked away, shrugged awkwardly, and said, "I thought I might stay with A-gee for a while. If he'll have me."

"Don't want the droid to get lonely," said Jariah.

Kyra flashed him a scowl; it relaxed when she realized he'd been serious. Jao announced they were coming in for landing, which shut down the conversation. He piloted the shuttle over the familiar platforms jutting out from the island cliff, then lowered them gently next to the larger body of *Free Agent*. Jariah had never spent much time in AG-37's ship, but he was surprised by how welcome the sight was.

Jao and Kyra headed out of the cockpit first. As Jariah followed, Deliah touched him lightly with the Force. He turned around, blinked, and said, "You're getting better."

"Only a little," she said. "But I felt that, too."

"Felt what?"

She bobbed her head toward the viewport. "Ania's ship."

"It's A-gee's and always was. But what about it?"

"It's not such a bad ship." She twirled blue hair with pink fingers. "Sauk's going back home, so I bet it could use a good mechanic."

Jariah took her meaning. "It ain't gonna be *Mynock*."

"Nothing could be *Mynock*. But I figure having work to do and place to go... It's better than sitting around."

"Might be true." The idea was tempting, and she was right; it had been in his head the moment he saw that ship. As they walked through the hold to the lowered landing ramp he added,

“So what, you’re not gonna go back to Zeltros and blow the rest of Rav’s cash on pink pretty *yum yums*? We still got some bullion left, after everything.”

“I’d get bored on Zeltros. And I thought that was *your* plan?”

“Nah, not mine. Besides, they got good *yum yums* right here.”

She gogged at him as they stepped onto the platform. “You mean Guri? Jariah, she’s a droid. And she’s two *hundred* years old.”

“I like experience in a woman.”

“Ever with the Force you’re still a pure *vermo*.”

“Good to know some things never change,” he said, and meant it.

Kyra and Jao were already at the door, and a droid- all durasteel, not pretty at all- came out to greet them. It took them through the winding white halls of the Thrumble Foundation center, and when Jao was expecting them to take a turn to the operating rooms they instead hung a left, down to the guest accommodation wing that had proven, four years back, to be more luxurious than it was secure.

Any damage left by those Mandos had been long erased, and the place looked as intimidatingly posh as ever. The droid took them into a room he’d never seen before. Long and rectangular, with a trio of nets in the middle and a polished faux-wood floor that was clearly harder than it looked, the springball court was currently split between one panting Mon Calamari and a supremely unexhausted assassin droid, racket clamped comically but effectively in his right hand.

R2-D2 tooted enthusiastically beside the door. Guri, looking as stunningly human as ever, patted the astromech’s dome and said, “We were making sure A-gee’s reflexes and coordination were optimized. The Thrumble Foundation has no live-fire training course for assassin droids.... So we had to improvise.”

“What do you think?” Jariah asked Sauk as the Mon Cal turned to face them. “Up to snuff?”

“Very,” he sighed and walked his racket over to a hangar on the wall.

AG-37, absolutely unphased, swiveled both halves of his head to take in the room with mirroring photoreceptor-sweeps. “It is good to see you are all fully functional.”

"You look fully functional yourself," Jariah admired. He stepped closer and scoured the droid's metal frame for evidence of welding that sealed his cut-up body, but Guri's magicians had left no marks. Given their track record, that was unsurprising.

"A-gee's been fully operational for a few days," Sauk put in. "At this point, basically we've been waiting for you."

"We appreciate that," Jao said. "I'm outbound to Bastion. There's a lot of work to be done there. A-Gee, I don't know if you've heard, but—"

"I received the latest upload of current news events three hours ago," the droid said. "Though I confess some of it is beyond my easy comprehension."

R2 hooted agreement and C-3PO, uncharacteristically silent until now, said, "The data we've received has been curiously imprecise about certain events, namely the near-calamity over Galactic City, and the avoidance of which still seems to confound experts."

"Experts don't know everything, professor," Jariah jibed.

"That... is a frightening prospect."

"It was the Force," Kyra said simply. "It worked through everyone... and everyone worked through it."

C-3PO tilted his head. "I'm... afraid such matters have always been beyond me."

R2-D2 chirped sadly, and AG-37 said, "I apologize for being unable to help when I was needed most."

His voice, usually devoid of inflection, ached with regret. It was strange, Jariah thought, not being able to feel any of these four automatons in the Force. He'd really gotten used to feeling it from other people, and in their unique ways the droids were more alive than most meat-bags he'd known.

Kyra walked up and put a hand on AG's arm. "Ania did what she needed to do. As a Solo. As a Skywalker. You helped her get that far."

The droid's photoreceptors dimmed, as though closing sad eyes. "I will always regret not being able to do more."

"So will I. But just because the Skywalkers are gone doesn't mean there's nothing for us to do."

"I hope that is the case. I understand what Jao and Sauk have planned. What do *you* mean to do, Kyra?"



She withdrew her hand and flushed, embarrassed. "I actually hadn't figured that out yet. I was hoping I could ride with you for a while."

"That is quite acceptable." His top photoreceptor swung to Jariah and Deliah. "And what of you? My condolences, of course, on the loss of your ship. And your friend."

"Thanks," said Jariah. "Though we gotta say, we were hoping to maybe hitch a ride too. For a little while. I mean, you're gonna be down a mechanic and Blue can fix things like nobody else- no offense, Sauk- and as for me, I've got a ton of connections if you're looking for jobs. Even legal ones."

He realized he was starting to ramble and shut up. AG-37 regarded him, then rotated his top photoreceptor to sweep through the entire room. "I believe that is an acceptable arrangement. I've discovered I am... used to the company of organics. I think I would miss them, being by myself."

Sometimes the honesty of droids still surprised. "Glad to be of help," Jariah said.

AG's lower they swung right on him. "We will help each other, I hope. That's what partnership is all about."

Jariah thought of Cade, as surely as the droid's metal mind was on Ania, and he said, "Yeah. I know what you mean."

The balcony looked out on churning ocean, now invisible in the night. Even when Kyra cantilevered over the railing and looked straight down she couldn't catch a hint of waves crashing on cliffs below. Darkness swallowed everything except this secure platform jutting out from the guest wing and the twinkling overhead stars.

She put both feet on the deck, straightened, closed her eyes and breathed deep. She sucked in salty air and listened to the eternal churn and crash of the ocean, and she could almost believe she'd been whisked back four years to the last time she'd stood here. That had been just days after her madcap escape from Socorro, and the trap that was her life. She'd been struck dazed by the richness and variety of the galaxy, and the goodness of its people, and her stay on Esseles had been the place where she could stop, collect herself, and indulge in calm marvel at the universe.

It hadn't lasted long. After a day or two, Marin's Manda-

lorians had kidnapped Ania and Maladi's plague had caught up with them. The wonder of the Force had become an absence and then a burden, and Kyra's universe, once so small, had exploded beyond anything she'd ever imagined.

Standing her with her eyes closed, smelling salt and hearing waves, it felt like a minute and forever ago.

When she heard the door behind her slide open Kyra thought, for the tiniest fraction of a second, it was Ania coming to talk with her on balcony. But that was four years ago, not today. Even before she completed her spin she knew it wasn't Ania or anyone else in the Force. C-3PO shuffled through the open doors, R2-D2 trailing right behind him. The panels slid shut behind them, sealing off the inner light.

Kyra asked, "Is something wrong, Threepio?" She still had an urge to call him 'Sleepy,' as she'd known him first.

"Nothing terribly urgent, Mistress, but it is quite late and Artoo noted you were not in your cabin. Given our plan for early departure tomorrow, he was concerned about your status." After a pause he added, "I was concerned too, Mistress."

"I was just thinking," she said, pressing her back against the railing.

"An excellent endeavor, Mistress, though Artoo insists I do it too much."

The astromech blurted. C-3PO chose not to translate.

Kyra looked at the protocol droid's metal face; it gleamed faintly with reflected starlight. She could recall it so battered and dirty that she'd never imagined his current gold splendor. When she'd found C-3PO's broken torso and stuttering head in Rugo's junkshop all those years ago, she hadn't had the slightest presentiment of her future.

"You know," she whispered, "I really have you to blame for everything. Or thank."

"Oh dear," he warbled. "I assure you if I caused you any unwanted stress it was wholly unintentional. I am, after all, a protocol droid, designed to service humans, rather than inconvenience them."

R2-D2 blurted again, quite rudely.

"Oh, you're one to talk, Artoo! You've dragged them into more trouble than I could even conceive!"

"You don't have to apologize for anything," Kyra said. "I was just thinking. I'd have never come here if we hadn't had to fix you up. And everything that came after..." She shook her head, sighed. You couldn't put it all into words.

"Ah, I understand now," C-3PO nodded. "You are lost in memory. Artoo was dealing with an analogous state recently and it gifted him with uncharacteristic introspection."

R2 refrained from comment. Kyra said, "I'm glad you're coming with us on *Free Agent*."

"We droids are made to serve our makers... And frankly, after losing Master Cade and all the other Skywalkers, Artoo and I are... somewhat uncertain how to proceed."

"I understand."

"With all due respect, Mistress, you do not. Through all our adventures- and misadventures- our fates have always been tied to that line, from one generation to the next. They have been our constant and, dare I say, our purpose..."

She smiled softly. "Sounds like Artoo's not the only one who's gotten introspective."

The astromech chirped agreeingly.

"Perhaps," C-3PO admitted. "It is just that we now find ourselves facing a future that is entirely unknown. The prospect is... intimidating."

"It is," she admitted. "But it's exciting too."

"Excitement?" His head perked up. "Oh dear. Anything but that."

R2 squealed.

"Yes, you would say so."

"I have an idea," Kyra said. "If A-gee's okay with it, we can run all the way out to Rohakalla. Best we know, those Keepers of the Whills are still there. If they're not, we'll find them." She smirked. "They've got a journal to complete. Making sure their story gets told is the least we can do for Ania and Cade, and I can't think of anyone better to end it than you two."

R2-D2 chirped enthusiastically. C-3PO's photoreceptors pulsed. "Goodness," he said, "How... humbling."

"Plus," she recalled, "Jariah and Deliah say they want to swing by Kiffex. Cade had relatives there, and they want to explain what happened to him. I don't know anything about them, but... it seems like something we should do."

R2 whistled another question, simple and direct: What then?

Kyra turned, closed her eyes, and gripped the balcony railing tight. When she opened them she saw nothing but stars. Each was a destination, too numerous to count. For so much of her life- during her long years trapped on Socorro- they'd felt unreachable and taunting. The last time she'd been on Esseles she'd wondered how many she might see. Her time since had been swept away in chases and searches, hard lessons and grave responsibility. She'd lost things and people she could never get back, but the galaxy left behind was bigger and deeper than ever before.

An answer came to her, and Kyra felt lifted on light breeze.

"Let's go exploring," she said.



